

A Young God's Heartbeat by Luddleston

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Summary:

Zagreus' life in the most boring Midwestern town imaginable is decidedly ordinary. It becomes less so when he learns that nineteen years ago, his mother, who happens to be a *goddess*, escaped the Underworld and moved so far away from home that none of his relatives there or on Olympus would ever find them.

And he's a god. Apparently.

Now that Hades has found out Zagreus is alive and on the surface, he wants his son to return to the Underworld—and he'll take him back by force if

need be. The only safe way to keep Zagreus above the surface is to get him to the Olympians, but he can't make it there alone. Nyx assigns one of her sons to escort him: Thanatos, Death Incarnate, who doesn't know how to drive, hates Zag's taste in road trip snacks, and has never been kissed.

Zag's not sure why that last one feels so important.

1. Chapter 1

Author's Note:

WOOOO my Hades Big Bang fic is finally here!!! Also my longest Hades fic (so far!)

Go give so much love to my wonderful artist, [Joanie](#), who did just a spectacular job illustrating this fic and also being such a sweet and encouraging person to work with!

It was barely five P.M., the middle of July, and yet, night had come early over the cottage at the dead end of the dirt road leading away from town. Although there were no neighbors for miles, the sky was wide open enough that somebody would spot the patch of midnight lingering over one specific home, which would inevitably lead to all kinds of weirdos coming by Zagreus' home only to have his mother explain away whatever was causing the disturbance.

That was what usually happened.

Although, he decided, leaning against the door of his truck and staring up at the stars, this was a little harder to explain than the usual questions over how Persephone could manage to make plants grow out of nothing.

There was a woman sitting next to his mother on the front porch, and she was the strangest person Zagreus had ever seen. Persephone had some odd friends, that much was certain, but Zag had never seen anybody dressed like a queen out of a fairy tale having a glass of lemonade on the porch.

When he approached, she stood, and the golden crown she wore nearly brushed the ceiling. If Zagreus stood beside her, he wouldn't even come up to her shoulder, and yet she was not intimidating. Her presence was gentle and even as she addressed him, she kept a hand on his mother's shoulder. "So. You must be Zagreus. It's a pleasure to finally get to meet you, my prince."

Reflexively, he laughed. "I'm not—no. I am Zagreus, but I'm not a prince. Hi. You must be a friend of my mother's?"

He'd been so distracted by this statuesque woman with her hair flowing even though there was hardly a breeze and her floor-length gown decorated with so many jewels and so much gold he wondered how it was at all comfortable, that he hadn't noticed the look on his mother's face. She was frowning, already a rare sight, and her face was pale under the tan she was already developing from spending so much time outside in the summer heat. She wouldn't look him in the eye. This was the most worrying detail of all.

"Zagreus, this is Nyx," she said, "and I think you had better sit down before we tell you what's going on."

"Just... out here? You're not worried about the weather?" He pointed off the porch at the sudden darkness that had descended like a curtain over the cottage.

"That, I'm afraid, is my doing," Nyx said, as if that was a totally normal thing to claim. His mother could sprout fully-grown plants out of empty soil, but that was... only a little supernatural. Certainly not an ability to bend the time of day. "I would have arrived after night had already fallen, to be less conspicuous, but I had to come as soon as I found out."

"Found what out?" Zagreus found himself tugged onto the porch bench by his mother, who really was insistent that he be seated for this.

He soon realized why, because Nyx announced: "your father is looking for you. To bring you back to the Underworld."

Long ago, there was a young woman who lived on Mount Olympus with her mother. Although her father, who had been a mortal, was now gone, she was happy to stay by her mother's side and spend time in the presence of her many relatives. It wasn't until she grew older that Olympus became stifling,

her relatives often ending up in petty squabbles that she wanted no part of, and she longed to go to a place where life would be simpler.

She said as much to one of her mother's foster brothers, Zeus, the king of the gods and the ruler of the skies. He promised to help her escape, but he planned without her knowing, and when the time came it felt more as if she was being stolen away than escaping to greener pastures.

Although she had long admired Lord Hades of the Underworld, she knew that his domain was separate from the plane on which she lived, and she never expected to go there, unlike mortals who travel there when their time on this earth is done. Zeus had brought her to Hades, however, and Hades made her his queen. At first, she was afraid, but Hades was inclined to let her do as she liked, irritated that his brother thought he needed a queen and busy with all that required his attention in the Underworld.

She made many friends in the Underworld, including the goddess of the Night and her many children, and Hades' most loyal guardian, Cerberus. And eventually, she came to love Hades himself.

This is the part that you do not know, Zagreus.

The mortals say that Persephone's mother—my mother, Demeter, turned the world to ice and snow and would not allow a green thing to grow until her daughter was returned, and that her daughter split her time between the surface and the Underworld. It is an explanation of why we have winter and spring.

They would say that the story ends there. But that isn't quite true, because you're here.

There was a prophecy, given to us by the Fates, the three of Nyx's daughters responsible for the destinies of the mortals and the divine. They claimed that Hades, my husband, would never have an heir. Hades had no want for one, so the prophecy was inconsequential, that is, until I found out that I was with child.

It was the general consensus that there was no way the child would survive to be born. Hades would have no heir, that had been prophesied, and the Fates are never wrong.

But I knew you were alive, Zagreus, and I knew there had to be a way both to make the prophecy into truth and save my child. I knew that if I left Hades, and no longer ruled the Underworld as his queen, then my child would not be his heir and the prophecy would be fulfilled. I could be your mother, as I desperately wanted, and, I...

I left.

I couldn't return to Olympus, but I did let my mother know that I was alive. She deserved that much, and the mortals deserved that much, for the world truly was encased in ice at the time. You met her, once, as a baby. But I had to hide you away somewhere, and even the smallest village in the countryside of Greece was not far enough from the rest of the Olympians, who would want to be guiding influences over this new god.

And so, eighteen years ago, I came here. And I swear I never thought he would find you.

I'm so sorry, my son.

I wish I could do more to protect you.

Zagreus was dreaming. Or he'd crashed the truck on the way home and he was unconscious and this was his weird coma-vision, or something.

Or else, his mother had lost her mind.

And if his mother was insane, Zagreus was right there with her. There was a woman cloaking the house in night, after all. He *had* to be dreaming.

"Zagreus, please say something, you're looking at me like I've gone mad."

"Part of me thinks you may have! Mother, there's no way... those are *stories*, not—ugh. Dreaming. I'm dreaming. That's what I'm going with. I've decided it. There's no way." He stood, walking off the porch, hoping that if he got far enough away from the house and this weird bubble of night, he'd wake up, or else slip into another dream that wasn't so complicated. Maybe one of the ones about being a play you hadn't rehearsed for. Or teeth falling out. Even that would be preferable to this tangled mess of confusion.

"Zagreus, you have to listen—"

"I'm quite alright not doing that, Dream Mother, because while it's a fantastic tale and would perhaps make an interesting movie, there is no way it's the honest truth!" He shoved his hands in his pockets as he made his way down the path. At the end of the driveway, the sky was still light. He could get back to normalcy once he hit the main road.

He didn't reach the end of the driveway, however, because a being materialized directly in front of him, making him stumble backwards, tumbling onto his ass on the gravel driveway. His palms smarted where he'd reached out to catch himself, which...

He couldn't be dreaming if he'd managed to hurt himself, right?

The man who stood—no, *floated*—over him towered nearly as tall as Nyx, with white hair that fell to his waist. With the hooded cloak and the ridiculously enormous scythe, he looked very much like the grim reaper.

Or, if he went by the tales his mother had told him...

"Don't tell me. Thanatos?"

The man blinked, and Zagreus realized his eyes were bright gold, almost orange. "You're not as oblivious as I thought you were going to be." His voice wasn't quite as ethereal as Nyx's, almost like he could be just a regular person in a costume. Except for the floating.

Even stranger, he vanished in a flash of green light and reappeared on the porch before Zag's mother, bowing low and addressing her as "Lady

Persephone."

Zagreus scrambled to his feet and followed Thanatos at a much less teleport-y speed. "This is all absolutely ridiculous!" he shouted, as he ran. "Are you honestly telling me I'm the son of a Greek god—I thought I was just *born in Greece!*"

"He's honestly taking this better than I thought," Mother said.

"*This* is better than you thought?" Thanatos asked.

"Does this make *me* a god!?" He paced back and forth before the porch steps, his usual bevy of energy running inordinately high. "Holy shit, Mother, I just graduated high school a month ago, and now I'm a god!?"

"Language, Zagreus."

Zagreus dragged both hands through his hair and groaned. "I think this is an appropriate time for language."

Nyx looked as though she may have been hiding laughter behind one hand.

"Zagreus." This time, he found himself being addressed with Persephone's best 'you shouldn't have done that' voice, and he stopped short of another bout of ranting, his hands hanging uselessly in the air in front of him.

"Mother." This was nearly the same way they'd argued last week over whether he could get a motorcycle (no, far too dangerous) and last month over whether he could get a tattoo (all right, fine).

"Come with me."

She opened the front door of the house, and did not wait for him to follow.

He found her inside her bedroom, digging through the antique trunk she usually used to store all the blankets when it wasn't wintertime. Despite the heat, she dumped everything out, and Zagreus realized she was prying open a false bottom to the trunk, and pulling out a box that was hidden within.

It was the kind of thing you saw in a museum, encrusted with jewels and gold and embellished with a strange, two-pronged symbol that was familiar because of how often he'd seen his mother doodle it. His tattoo, which she had designed, even somewhat resembled this glyph.

"This was made for you by your father," she said, "if you had lived there, you likely would have worn it every day, but, well. It'd turn some heads, around here."

Zagreus lifted the lid of the box, and inside, sitting on a cushion of green velvet, was a wreath of leaves—laurels. They were coal-black, clearly not fresh greenery, but there was something *alive* about them, a pleasant, pulsating heat that matched the beat of his heart.

Zagreus brushed his fingers over one of the leaves, near the center where the laurel wreath was thickest, and the longer he looked at it, the less sooty the color appeared. It started to bleed red, a deep burgundy which spread out, licking across the surface of the leaves like spilled paint. "Mother, what...?" he asked, as the change in color continued to spread, becoming brighter toward the ends of the leaves, orange and then yellow.

Persephone watched him with her hands over her mouth. "I wasn't sure... after all these years, whether it would still react to you like this."

The warmth of the laurel wreath wasn't just a color, wasn't just a feeling, but a *sound*, too, crackling like sparks on a fire, even though the leaves were not consumed by flame. He set the box on the lid of the trunk, lifting the wreath out. "Should I... put it on?"

"If you would like, go ahead."

She looked at him with a strange sort of hope in her eyes, like Zagreus wearing the laurel would mean something, or prove something—and he was nothing if not willing to entertain his mother's hopes. He set it on his head gingerly, unaccustomed to wearing such an adornment, and as soon as it settled in place, a shower of sparks burst toward the ceiling, so voluminous Zagreus thought they might burn the place down until he realized they weren't really sparks after all.

They were leaves, fiery orange and red, and they settled to the carpet harmlessly, still glinting where they sat.

At first, he thought his mother's little noise of shock had been at the eruption of leaves, but he soon realized she was not looking at them, but straight at him instead. She pointed to the mirror hung over her armoire. "Zagreus, look."

She had been looking, Zagreus realized, at his eyes.

He'd always had one red eye, one green. A rare form of heterochromia, his mother told him, albinism in one eye, unusual but not abnormal. That had been another untruth, or perhaps a half-truth. It certainly was a *rare* genetic trait.

As he set the mark of his own godhood upon his head, his right eye had changed, the white of it gone black as the pupil.

He blinked at himself in the mirror, turning his face this way and that, examining. He felt no different, but the color itself was unnerving—when Zagreus glanced at only the right side of his face he looked like a different person, the blackness sharpening his other features. His dark eyelashes faded into his sclera so that the softness they gave his face was hidden. The red of his eye glowed brighter, matching the red of the laurel that burned against the dark of his hair.

He knew, before his mother said a word, that it was his father's eye which looked back at him.

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"Your father," Thanatos said, wasting no time after being told that Zagreus had calmed down and was beginning to accept the strange world he was finding himself pushed into, "is already sending wretches from the Underworld after you. It's too dangerous for you to stay in one place—"

"I'm not just going to up and leave home." Zagreus stood in the middle of the living room, because Thanatos wouldn't take a seat. He continued to

float in midair, and Zagreus felt the distinct need to remain on his feet to challenge the looming Thanatos, even though his five-feet-seven-inches felt rather lacking. "Mother needs me around here."

Mother had gone to take the dog on a walk, and had brought Nyx with her, even though Nyx didn't seem like much of a dog person. Kirby, the unidentifiable mutt Zagreus had picked up from god-knows-where five years ago, was sweet enough to make anybody into a dog person, though.

"Let me put it this way." Thanatos folded his arms as if settling in for an argument. "If you stay here, Lord Hades will not find only you. He will also find your mother, who has made it abundantly clear she does not want her husband to find her. Are you planning on allowing him to do so?"

"Of course not!" Zagreus was pacing now, even though the living room didn't have quite enough space for it. He jammed his shin against the coffee table. Out of the corner of his eye, back to its usual red now that he'd put the laurel back in its box for safekeeping, he caught Thanatos shaking his head.

"So. The solution."

"Olympus," Zagreus said. Nyx had been the one to explain to him that the safest place for him to be right now was in the presence of his Olympian relatives. His mother didn't get along with them, but it was better than Zagreus becoming trapped in the Underworld for eternity, which was what he'd been promised would happen if Hades caught him. "What's the difference between living on a mountain with my aunts and uncles forever and living underground with my father forever?"

"Olympus won't be permanent. Once your father's ire has calmed, and Nyx has convinced him to let you remain on the surface, you can return to... this place." His nose wrinkled as though he wasn't sure why Zagreus would want to.

He kind of got that. Iowa was boring as hell.

Living underground or on a mountaintop both seemed equally boring, though, and neither of those places would have his mother or his dog or his

friends.

(Not that home would have his friends, either. They were all moving off to their out-of-state colleges come September, while Zagreus was taking a gap year. It was going to be a very strange gap year.)

"So, I'm going to Greece." The boarding pass for his flight was already on the coffee table, having been procured by Nyx or Thanatos or his mother. He didn't like that it said 'one-way'.

Thanatos simply nodded. He tracked every step Zagreus took, his orangey-gold eyes following him back and forth, back and forth, like a cat looking at a laser pointer. Zagreus was half-expecting him to pounce at any time. "Mother asked me to escort you to the airport. She said there was a chance your father could attack, and that I am to keep his wretches at bay."

"Hate to have them kidnap me and drag me to the Underworld. Thanks, mate."

"Oh, they won't kidnap you," Thanatos said, a hint of a smile to his voice, "they'll just kill you. Much faster."

Zagreus ran into the coffee table again.

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"I'm so sorry, Zagreus," his mother said again as she hugged him tight in the middle of the driveway. Apparently, 'you have to go to Greece' meant 'you have to go *now*,' and so Zagreus had packed whatever wasn't in his dirty clothes hamper into a duffel bag that he'd unceremoniously shoved into the backseat of his truck.

"I'll be alright, Mother." There was no way of knowing that, he thought, but it would be best to tell her so. Even if the look in her eyes said she didn't totally believe it either.

The door to the house swung open and then shut again, and Persephone let Zagreus go, the both of them turning to see Thanatos actually *walking* down

the stairs instead of floating this time, looking vastly different.

Zagreus wasn't sure how Thanatos had managed a metamorphosis in under twenty minutes. Gone were the flowing robes, the waist-length hair, the enormous scythe. Instead, Thanatos was dressed in a leather jacket, with golden wings embroidered down the shoulder where he used to have a winged ornament Zagreus couldn't entirely discern the purpose of. The rest of his ensemble had been exchanged for dark jeans and combat boots, and a T-shirt with a pattern that resembled the elaborate neck-piece he'd been wearing before.

"What," he said to Zagreus, as if it was perfectly normal for someone to go from looking like a god to looking like an ordinary, if very fashionable, human man.

"You looked better with your hair long," Zagreus remarked.

Thanatos replied with a very heartfelt, *"ugh."* He then teleported himself inside the truck.

Nyx floated after him, still looking every inch a goddess, her presence no less intimidating even though the sky had all gone dark and her patch of nighttime no longer stood out. She folded her hands and looked between Thanatos sitting in the passenger seat of the truck, and Zagreus. "I know the two of you will not have to spend too much time together, but please do try to get along," she said. "You're more alike than you think."

It didn't feel appropriate to argue with her, even though they didn't seem even a little bit alike.

"I'll do my best," he said instead.

He didn't actually say 'goodbye' to his mother, because actually getting the word out was a step too close in the 'dissolving into tears' direction for him. He did hug her again, so tight he accidentally crushed the lilacs she had woven into her hair.

The scent stayed with him until he reached the highway.

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There were three exits until the one he needed to take to get to the airport. Zagreus had been counting them down for six miles, now, because otherwise, he'd lose himself in his thoughts and miss his turn. So. Three. If he missed his turn, he'd miss his flight. As it were, he was already cutting it close.

Two.

Was he supposed to be taking the A exit or the B one?

Before he could even glance at his GPS, he had to come to an abrupt stop, because, for the fourth? fifth? time that day, something impossible and supernatural was happening in his vicinity.

A glowing sigil burned into the asphalt before him, full of strange symbols he didn't recognize, and then another appeared beside it, and another, until there were four of them lighting up the otherwise-empty freeway. Thanatos put a hand out, across Zagreus' chest.

"Blood and darkness," he spat, like a curse, "they're already here. I didn't think—"

Silhouettes of hulking figures appeared within the confines of each sigil, and Thanatos, rather than doing something sensible and perhaps allowing Zagreus to back away, opened the door.

Zagreus threw the truck into park. "Hey, wait!"

"Stay in the car!" Thanatos said, before Zagreus had so much as set foot on the road. "I can take care of them. Stay back and let me."

Zagreus wasn't without a weapon, of course. His mother had given him Exagryph for his sixteenth birthday, and although he didn't make it out to the range as much as he'd like, he knew he was a good shot with the pistol. It was currently strapped into holster he never really wore, sitting in the glove box of. He'd been concerned when she first urged him to take it with

him—it wasn't like he'd get a *gun* on the plane, Mother, and what was he to do with it otherwise? Just leave it in the truck until he got back? Give it to Death for safekeeping?

Now, he was glad she'd convinced him.

Thanatos, it appeared, *was* without a weapon as he approached the four figures, which had turned monstrous, great beasts dragged from below the earth.

He didn't seem to need one. Thanatos simply raised his hand and another sigil appeared on the ground, this one black as the night Nyx had spread across the early-evening sky, ringed with violet and large enough to trap three out of the four monsters. It shone there for just a moment, and then it vanished, taking the creatures with it, as though pulling them back to the Underworld from whence they came.

The fourth was advancing on him. Zagreus lifted Exagryph, realized it was much harder to steady his aim when his heart wouldn't stop pounding and fear made his throat constrict. Before he could even take a shot, Thanatos whirled around to face the monster, pulling not his scythe, but a sword out of thin air and driving it into the heart of the beast with seemingly little effort. Zagreus' hair stood on end just watching him.

There was a soft, hissing sound from behind him and Thanatos turned, looking over Zagreus' head. "Get back in the damn car!" he shouted, blinking across the highway in a flash of green.

Zagreus whipped around to watch Thanatos, as more monsters appeared from the opposite direction. There were six this time, and two of them were bigger, and moved much faster than the others had, rushing Thanatos before he had a chance to manifest his sigil on the ground.

Zagreus stepped out of the truck, put his feet on solid ground. Breathed. Aimed steadier this time.

A single shot from Exagryph was enough to take out one of the beasts, allowing Thanatos to focus his attention on the others. It became difficult to

aim around him, Thanatos darting too fast and too unpredictably for Zagreus to be reasonably certain he wouldn't hit him.

A flash of movement in his peripheral drew Zagreus attention, and he caught sight of a creature even stranger than the enormous, orange-skinned monsters that were rushing Than.

It was a single, floating, disembodied hand, and it was ever-steadily approaching him, holding a thick length of chain.

If he'd noticed it sooner, he probably could have avoided it.

He hadn't noticed it sooner.

"Than—!" Zagreus lunged forward, trying to get out of the way, but the chain wrapped around him like a living being, like it was as much a part of this monster as its fingers were, drawing tighter as he struggled. He was pulled backward, almost off his feet. This certainly felt like an attempt to drag him to hell.

For a moment, he thought the pit opening beneath him was the entrance into the Underworld, but he realized it was the same dark sigil Thanatos had used to dispatch the other monsters. Zagreus stilled—struggling only made the chains tighter—and squeezed his eyes shut, hoping that Thanatos' magic wouldn't destroy Zagreus as easily as it'd taken out those other creatures. A rush of cold ran through him as it activated, and then Zagreus pitched forward, no longer held back by inescapable lengths of metal, falling to his knees on what, now, looked like an ordinary stretch of road.

Thanatos grasped him by his bicep, pulling him easily to his feet with godly strength. "I told you," he hissed through his teeth, hauling Zagreus backward until his shoulders were pressed to the side of the truck, Thanatos pinning him there, "to stay in the car."

"Still got in one good shot, at least, didn't I?" he said, gesturing weakly with Exagryph, still clutched in his hand, which shook.

"You could have died. You don't know how to fight those wretches, how to predict the patterns in which they move." Thanatos shook his head. "I can't leave you alone. Are you hurt?"

Zagreus shook his head. He was bruised, sure, but it was nothing that needed attention.

"Good. Get in the car. We're switching to plan B."

"Plan—what about my flight!?"

"You can't make it in time for that, I'm sure." Thanatos shoved him toward the still-open car door. "And I can't let you go alone. It's too dangerous. Drive. East. I can't let you get on a plane without me, but I can get you to your other uncle's domain." He groaned, irritated either with himself, with Zagreus, or with the scenario as a whole. "Even if it's going to take significantly longer."

"What," Zagreus said, slamming the door behind himself and refusing to drive until he got an explanation, "do you *mean*?"

Thanatos had once again teleported into the passenger seat. "I mean, your uncle Poseidon. We have to get you to the ocean, Zagreus. Before your father kills you."

"Well, alright. I'd really like it if he didn't kill me, yeah."

— — —

Dull fluorescent lights buzzed overhead, Thanatos was looking around like they'd be attacked again at any moment, and Zagreus was frankly appalled by the lack of variety in snacks this gas station convenience store had on offer.

"You know, ordinarily, I'd enjoy the idea of a road trip. If it didn't involve running for our lives, that is."

Thanatos stuck close to Zagreus as he meandered through the store, making little irritated scoffs like this entire detour was unnecessary. This, of course

was wrong, Zagreus would need some snacks if he meant to drive through the night. He wasn't bothered much by weariness on the road, but hunger was another matter entirely.

"What is all of this?" Thanatos asked, looking at the various items Zagreus was picking up. "I wouldn't think you'd need to eat."

"It seems I've made a habit of it," Zagreus said, his mind too stuffed full with strangeness to accept the fact that Thanatos had just admitted his surprise at Zagreus' *need to eat*. "Do you not?"

"No. Not usually."

"I'm making you try all my snacks, then," Zagreus decided, heading for the cooler to determine which flavor of soda would most offend the palate of a god. Mtn Dew, probably, but he couldn't stand caffiene.

Thanatos also did not understand the necessity of putting gas in a vehicle to make it drive. He just wrinkled his nose at the smell of it and actually opened the door to get inside, since there were two other cars parked nearby and plenty of people about who wouldn't react well to seeing a man teleport.

Zagreus hopped back into the driver's seat once the tank was full and tore open a bag of Doritos. "I told you we wouldn't get attacked during a five-minute break," he said. "Here." He extended a chip to Thanatos, who made the same face he'd made when he smelled gasoline.

"I'm not going to eat that."

"Just try it! You're in the human world now, or whatever, enjoy it while you're here!"

Thanatos took it, covering his mouth while he chewed and looking increasingly disgusted. "This is awful." He looked at the label on the bag. "'Cool Ranch'? Is there a 'Hot Ranch' somewhere, and is it less horrid?"

"I had not considered the possibilities of Hot Ranch," Zagreus admitted. He reached for the bag—more for him, if Thanatos didn't like them. He'd already done some quick configuring with his phone to determine the closest ocean access (East Coast, obviously, near New York), and he plugged his phone in so that the GPS wouldn't kill it dead right away. He'd rather crash his truck than drive in silence, so he plugged the aux cord in, too.

"Your music is terrible," Thanatos said, before they even reached the highway.

"Don't pretend I didn't just see you stealing a gummy shark."

"The gummy sharks are also terrible." Thanatos sighed, leaning back against the headrest. "I can't believe mortals have to put so much time into just getting somewhere."

"At least traffic slows down late at night," Zagreus said, "we won't have to worry about getting held up. According to this—" he lifted his phone and showed Thanatos the screen, "—we'll be seaside by tomorrow. Doesn't seem too hard."

Thanatos closed his eyes, and it made him look a little less unsettling, a little more human. Zagreus wasn't sure if he liked him better unsettling. "Don't tempt your father to make it harder on you," he said.

Zagreus laughed. "He can try."



He did try. Zagreus was singing along to his, quote, *terrible and far too loud* music when another monster came after them, this one immediately different than their last encounter. It was more human-like, for one, human-looking enough that Zagreus slammed on the brakes, unsure why somebody was standing in the middle of the highway and terrified of hitting them. As it turned out, he didn't need to worry, because the unfortunate person he nearly ran down turned out to have wings, and leapt into the air before Zagreus would have hit them. It would have been cool, if they hadn't landed

straight on the hood of his truck, a heavy enough fall to dent it in and send a plume of smoke billowing from the engine like an ominous portent of 'your car is not going to be drivable after this'. *"What the hell!"* Zagreus screeched.

"Oh, great," Thanatos sighed, much less impressed. "Will you stay in the car this time?" he asked Zagreus.

"No, I don't think I will!" He was already putting it into park, turning the car off so the engine didn't catch on fire or explode, hoping that if anybody was speeding along this highway at night, they'd realize there was somebody just sitting in the fast lane because some kind of batman had landed on their car and probably totaled it.

Batwoman he realized after a second, when the newest denizen of the Underworld he met stepped into the light of the nearest streetlamp.



She was head and shoulders taller than Zagreus, with one huge bat-like wing shadowing half her face and what was probably some kind of weapon clutched in one hand. He couldn't exactly make out her expression, but from the way she stood, back straight and free hand on her hip, she didn't seem pleased.

"So, Lord Hades roped you into all this, too?" Thanatos asked. He held his sword, but his grip was loose, like he intended on conversing instead of jumping straight into battle. Zagreus had tucked Exagryph into the waistband of his jeans, and kept a hand on the pistol just in case. As if his draw would be faster than this woman moved.

"And I see Nyx drafted you into joining the other side of the fight. Should have figured." Her voice was a rasp, barely above a whisper, like she knew she didn't have to shout to be heard. A somewhat confusing chill ran up Zagreus' spine. She was quite beautiful, if strange.

"I suggest you be on your way, Megaera. I'd rather not have to dispatch you."

"As if you could." She unspooled what turned out to be a whip made of braided cords, so bright pink Zagreus could see it even in the darkness, and she leapt into the air, twisting around and showing off the reverse of her wing, which was just as pink. "I recommend you come with me, Prince Zagreus. You won't like who he sends next."

That particular threat caused Thanatos to make a little growling noise. "Really? He called up all three of you?"

"Amazing what finding a long-lost Prince of the Underworld will do to bring a family together. Or, not really. I'm still working solo."

Thanatos disappeared and reappeared directly in front of Zagreus. "Run," he said. "Do whatever you can to stay away from her while I take her out. She's a lot more dangerous than a swarm of wretches."

Megaera didn't have anything more to say, choosing to strike instead. She moved almost as fast as Thanatos teleporting, leaping the span of a few yards between them in a single bound. Zagreus was already running, but he had to work hard to get out of her way. It was easier for Thanatos to dodge; she hadn't been aiming for him.

Thanatos' wide circle of darkness appeared below them again, and Zagreus hopped over the highway divider, hoping he could crouch down there and get a better shot at her. Megaera was forced to back away to avoid being caught in Thanatos' sigil, but the way she moved made one thing obvious: he was never going to get her with that.

"I meant what I said, Meg! I don't want to hurt you!"

"That's boring of you, Than." When she cried out and spun her whip in a circle, a volley of purple lights burst from her, forcing Thanatos to take flight and Zagreus to abandon trying to aim at her. He ducked out of the way of her attack but still didn't manage to fully avoid it, one of the sparks of energy striking him across the cheek and another across the shoulder, both burning like an electrical shock.

Megaera may have forced him back, but she was still coming in his direction and he could take aim as long as he was fast enough.

Zagreus was crouched down when he saw her leap across the divider, a flash of brightness as she struck at the same time he fired. Exagryph was knocked from his hand with a swift strike of her whip, skittering across the pavement and out of his reach. His shot went way off course.

He made to sprint for his weapon, but she was leagues faster than Zagreus and struck again before he could so much as scramble to grab it, knocking him off his feet and sending him sprawling.

Well, he thought, as she pulled back to strike again while her target was down, if he was going to be killed by anybody, she seemed to be a worthy opponent at least. He shut his eyes, gritted his teeth, holding a hand up as if blocking his face from her strike would do anything to help him, and...

It never came.

When Zagreus opened his eyes, Thanatos was standing over him, the enormous blade of his sword skewered through her torso and pushing further.

"Thought you didn't want to hurt me," she said, the words coming out choked, as Thanatos drew the blade back. The blood on it was a weird blackish-blue, and he frowned at it.

"It seems you've forced my hand. Tell Hypnos I said hello."

A splash of bright red appeared beneath Megara's feet, and she slumped forward like a doll as she sank into it, back down, Zagreus assumed, to the Underworld. It looked as though she was descending into a pool of blood, far more gruesome than what had had happened to the other wretches they'd fought.

Even when it disappeared and left them standing in an ordinary spot of highway, Zagreus stared at the place she'd sunk into.

"I'm sorry," he said, not sure if he was speaking to Thanatos or to her.

Thanatos was less perturbed by what had happened to their adversary, and simply stood there with his arms crossed, his sword having vanished to wherever it went while he wasn't fighting. Zagreus assumed this meant the danger had, at least somewhat, passed them by. "We really need to teach you how to defend yourself better," he said, and Zagreus couldn't help but agree. He was a good shot, but being able to aim at a target didn't translate perfectly to being able to aim at a winged woman who was trying to kill you with a whip.

Speaking of... where *was* Exagryph.

Zagreus turned in the direction it had been whacked in when Megara hit his hand, and found that not only was his gun right in front of his face, it was being held out handle-first like an offering by a man who looked almost as strange as Thanatos and Nyx did, and therefore was probably a god.

"Hey there, coz! Think you might have dropped something. Also think you might want to get out of the road, yeah?"

"Uh... yeah." Zagreus took his weapon and then took the hand extended to him as the newcomer pulled him to his feet. He was dressed all in orange and had... *wings on his head*? Oh. Hermes. Zagreus knew enough to draw that particular association. "Thank you, but I don't know if we'll exactly be able to get out of the road until we, I dunno, call for a tow."

Hermes laughed, bounding over the highway divider and hovering before the hood of the car, still smoking from Megara crushing it. "C'mon, you don't think the god of travel is appearing to you for no reason, right? Do you know how busy my schedule is!? I had to make time to help out my mysterious new cousin, though. And you, of course, Thanatos. Your brother says hi, by the way. Or, actually, he said *huaaaagh* but I think that meant 'my dearest professional associate, please do tell Thanatos I say hi'. So, Charon says hi."

He gave this entire tirade while darting around the truck, popping inside to open the hood, and then rattling around in the general area of the engine in

a way Zagreus thought was more likely to further damage the vehicle.

Thanatos didn't respond to the comment about his brother with anything aside from a nod, which Hermes either seemed to sense or not care about, because he kept going.

"Tragically, this may take a while. I suggest you gents take a rest in the back while you can, as it turns out, some people *do* need to slow down at times. Who would have thought! Not me, certainly." He was banging around even louder in there now, and if Zagreus continued to watch what he was doing, he'd be stressed beyond belief, so he agreed to Hermes' terms and hopped into the truckbed, trying to ignore the clattering from the front end.

Thanatos, to his surprise, joined him, floating into the truckbed beside him and settling with his back to the cab beside Zagreus. "Are you..." he began, and then cut himself off, staring at the sky above as if fumbling for words. "Are you all right?"

"This smarts a bit," he said, gesturing to the mark on his cheek where the little ball of magic or energy or whatever it had been had collided with him. "Who was that woman?"

"Megaera. She's the first of the Furies, usually employed by your father to torment the souls of those who do something especially egregious in life. Oathbreakers are her specialty."

"And now she's tormenting me." Zagreus knew the title but not the specifics, had never connected a Fury with a living person who was especially intent on his demise.

Thanatos nodded.

"You seemed like you knew her?"

"I do. We were raised together, along with my twin brother and her sisters—although her sisters have been banned from the House of Hades, so I don't see them often." He drew his leg up, leaning his chin on his knee, his wrists

loosely crossed over his ankle. "I can only hope she was lying about them coming after us."

"You brother, the one Hermes was talking about?"

Thanatos rolled his head to the side so he could look at Zagreus, his hair scattering shadows over his face. "No, Hermes is talking about my eldest brother, Charon. My twin is Hypnos, sleep incarnate in the same way I am death. I have... a lot of siblings. The Fates are my sisters, and then there's Nemesis and Eris... blood and darkness, however did Mother Nyx keep track of us all?"

"Must make for some interesting family reunions." Zagreus picked at a loose thread at the hem of his jeans, watching headlights appear in the distance and then fade as cars passed them. None of them seemed to slow to catch a glimpse of the floating god doing some intense mechanical repairs.

"You may be surprised to learn that we don't have many of those. I think they're more common on Olympus, though. Your cousin Dionysus will probably hold a feast for the ages when you get there."

Zagreus tipped his head back, the coolness of the glass on the rear window seeping into his scalp. "I doubt they'll be pleased with having to watch over me," he said.

"They'll be thrilled," Thanatos said, "you're valuable. Nobody knows what you're the god of, yet, but considering that you're the son of Hades and Persephone, and the grandson of Demeter, you're bound to be something quite powerful."

So far, the only supernatural abilities he'd demonstrated had been being able to make a laurel wreath light up and having one eye that sometimes turned black. "I don't think I'm the god of anything," he admitted. "Certainly not something as powerful as you. I mean, Death? You must be one of the strongest ones out there."

It got a laugh out of Thanatos, and Zagreus' gaze immediately dropped to see if he could catch the smile on his face. It had faded by the time he

caught Thanatos' eye, though. "Olympus doesn't pay me much mind. I only deal with mortal affairs, of course, and they are beyond that. They're only bothered when the mortals stop dying or die too quickly, although the latter is usually Ares' fault."

Zagreus watched the stars above them for a while, even though they were dimmed slightly by the streetlights and the proximity to civilization. It was a clear night, a bright moon, as if Thanatos' mother had wanted to give him the best chance of making his journey as she could. "Well, they're idiots, then, aren't they? You took that Fury out in one hit, I mean, I wouldn't want to get in a fight with you."

"So, stop trying to get me to eat your terrible road trip snacks, then."

"You wouldn't stab me. You like me too much."

"That's entirely untrue. I wouldn't stab you because I am obedient to my mother and to the Queen."

"And because you like me. Because we're friends."

"We're not—"

"I'm friends with Death, everybody, that's right," Zagreus said, as if he was announcing the news to the world. "Yes, you would not believe, he likes me so much he saved my life from a very angry blue woman—"

There was a thump on the roof of the truck as Hermes landed above them, poking his head down between Thanatos' and Zag's. "Hey, boss, if you're done flirting with Death, I'd like to announce that there's been a tragic accident done unto your car by that Fury, really just awful."

"You can't get it working?" Zagreus hopped out of the bed and raced around to the front of the truck, which was actually looking better in that it was no longer smoking and the dent in the hood was somewhat less extreme.

Hermes drifted above him, slumping over in midair as if he was languishing on some kind of fancy old fainting couch. Zagreus could appreciate the

drama of it. "No, no, even worse. I can't get it to go *faster*."

"That's *fine*, Hermes," Thanatos grumbled, joining them and observing the hood of the car as though he could appraise it even though he hadn't known what gasoline was up until a few hours ago.

"You won't be able to drive it on the highway, though! You'll be going so slow, I wish I could give you a boon to make you faster, but that works alright for a person running and very badly for a vehicle on account of the whole stopping thing."

"How fast can we get it going?"

Hermes made a face like he'd tasted something sour when he admitted, "maybe fifty miles per hour, maximum? *Ugh*. Terribly slow. Glacial, even."

"So, we take the long way. How much does that add to the trip?" Thanatos asked, teleporting in and out of the truck to grab Zagreus' phone for him. He worried for a moment, but the phone seemed none the worse for wear for being teleported. They'd originally had fourteen hours left, which seemed like a slog, but...

"Twenty-four hours of driving. Oh. Wow. Alright, then, I suppose we'd best get going before we get attacked and slowed down even more," Zagreus said. He was already feeling the exhaustion creeping in, probably because of the fight they'd gotten themselves into, and Thanatos couldn't get behind the wheel.

"I suppose I ought to tell Dionysus you'll be late," Hermes sighed. "My deepest apologies, coz, I hope to see you later. On Olympus, that is; I've got a bet running with Charon that you'll make it there, you know, rather than being sent down below."

"You're *betting* on—" Thanatos sounded particularly scandalized on Zagreus' behalf.

"Of course we are! Later, gents, I'm off!" With that, he was off, zipping away into the dark so fast Zagreus hardly saw him go, almost mocking the

fact that they were going to take twenty-four hours of driving time to reach their destination.

Despite the fact that it had never, ever done anything except make him anxious, Zagreus sort of wanted a coffee.

— — —

Zagreus only realized what Hermes had meant by *I'll tell Dionysus you'll be late* when, at around five in the morning, Thanatos told Zagreus to pull into a parking lot apropos of absolutely nothing. It was a strip mall, with a nail salon, a defunct grocery store, and a liquor store, which Thanatos started walking toward as soon as Zagreus parked. There was no way it was open; the parking lot was empty except for Zagreus' truck, but Thanatos just teleported inside the building and unlocked the door.

"What are you waiting for? Get inside," he ordered, like he did casual burglary every Tuesday.

"You can't just! Than!"

"Come on, it's fine," he said, still holding the door open.

Despite the fact that there had been no breaking, only entering, Zagreus still felt a creeping sensation of wrongness as they walked in. That feeling may have also had something to do with the fact that he was still a few years underage and had never really been into that whole 'get a fake ID so you can get drunk at high school parties' thing. Running cross country while hungover had always sounded like hell to Zagreus, and with their meets scheduled for Saturday mornings, Friday nights were basically out. Plus, he had no idea where you even got a fake ID.

The lights were all shut off inside the shop, except for the bluish-white ones illuminating the cooler on the far side of the wall, and the red neon sign that labeled the door next to the coolers as the "BEER CAVE."

Zagreus had no desire to go inside anywhere called a "BEER CAVE," but that's where Thanatos was headed, and like a duckling in a row, Zagreus

followed him.

He wasn't certain what he was expecting to be inside, but it wasn't this.

A few dozen packages of beer had been stacked up inside to resemble a throne, upon which was the strangest man Zagreus had ever seen. The purple hair would have been weird enough—at least, Zagreus *thought* it was purple, it was hard to tell in the weird blue cooler-light—but he'd also elected to dress in a lot of leopard print and more bright purple. Combined with the fact that he was lounging on a throne made of beer, the whole atmosphere made him look like some kind of king of alcohol. He was holding a bottle of wine, which he gestured to Thanatos with, and announced in a voice a bit blurred around the edges:

"You're *quite* late. I've had to hang out here, drinking all this stuff, and it is *not good*, I'll tell you. Not good at all. What are these humans doing with my gifts, honestly? I ought to come down here for a while and help them sort it out."

Were there... *grapes* in his hair?

"Dionysus." Thanatos was a little more stiff with him than he'd been with Hermes, despite Dionysus' lazy attitude feeling much more comfortable than Hermes' frenetic way of speaking.

"Oh, and heeey, you must be Zag! Good to meet you, man." He gestured widely as if he was welcoming Zagreus to a palace and not a beer cooler. "I am, as Thanatos has introduced me, Dionysus, the god of wine and your *favorite* cousin, shhh, I know you haven't met them all yet, but I'm definitely your favorite, alright?"

"Sure," Zagreus said, because it felt best to agree. "It's good to meet you."

"Of course, of course, come, hang out, have a drink." He offered Zagreus the bottle of wine, and Zagreus examined it. There was a nondescript picture of a vineyard on the front, and Dionysus had pronounced it 'not good at all,' so he wasn't sure how much he wanted to follow Dionysus' suggestion.

Luckily, Thanatos stepped it, snatching the bottle and setting it out of reach. "We're on a bit of a time limit, Dionysus. And Zagreus isn't of legal drinking age, according to that sign right over your head. And he's about to drive a car, which that other sign says not to do while intoxicated."

"You're no fun, Thanatos, you ought to lighten up from time to time, stop listening to what signs tell you to do." The bottle of wine floated back into Dionysus' hand, and he drank from it, then looked at it with deep disappointment. "Ah, well. I'll give you the good stuff when you get to Olympus, Zag. For now, I'll help you out in getting there. May I see that weapon of yours?"

Zagreus handed over Exagryph, triple-checking the safety and wondering if he should have unloaded it before handing it to somebody who was likely drunk.

Dionysus whistled as he examined the pistol, turning it from side to side. "Looks different, but it sure is the same one Hestia used. I can give it a little bit more a punch, though, if you like?"

"I suppose so?"

The flash of purple light made Zagreus flinch, even though it wasn't quite the same shade as the projectiles Megara had fired at him. Dionysus handed it back, grinning widely at him. "This'll do. Hit somebody with that, man, they'll be feeling it for hours. Hangover like you would not believe."

"Seems useful. Thanks, mate." Exagryph didn't look any different, but there was a feeling in it, like if Zagreus concentrated hard enough he could sense something bubbly inside.

"You are so welcome. Now, when you get to Olympus—"

"Dionysus. Who should we be expecting next?"

Dionysus sighed, glaring at Thanatos with sharpness that was unexpected from somebody so tipsy. "I dunno, man. Aphrodite's around. Artemis, too,

if you can believe it. I'm sure she's in the woods somewhere. But nobody told me exactly where you'd find them. I expect they'll come to you."

Zagreus could see Thanatos' jaw clench. "Alright. We've got to go, if you don't have anything helpful to say. Come on, Zagreus."

"This is why nobody invites you to feasts, man! I mean it, lighten up!"

The bell above the front door of the shop rang out cheerfully as Thanatos grumbled his way to the car. He actually opened the door this time, if only so that he could slam it behind himself.

"So, I take it you don't like to party?" Zagreus was mostly successful at not bursting into hysterical laughter at the look on Thanatos' face, like a grumpy little cat.

Thanatos refused to answer, which was answer enough, Zagreus supposed.

"Hey, what do you think the owner of that shop's gonna do when they come in tomorrow morning and find some guy drunk in their cooler on a throne made of beer?"

"Probably call the authorities."

Zagreus pictured it and shoved a hand over his face to hide his laughter. "He'll just tell them their wine is bad."

"Don't laugh, he's your cousin."

"Pfft. You're laughing too, Than."

"I certainly am not."

He was.

Zagreus pulled out of the parking lot, wishing the owner of the liquor store much luck in their godly interactions to come.

2. Chapter 2

Summary for the Chapter:

In which Zagreus continues to bother Thanatos with mortal food, meets Artemis, and thinks about kissing Death.

Notes for the Chapter:

Thank you all so much for the response to chapter 1!! I hope you enjoy continued shenanigans!

"Why are there so *many*?"

Thanatos was, of course, referring to the number of cars on this road, which was clogged to bursting due to construction on the highway, construction on the back roads, and, you guessed it, more construction and a few hundred feet in front of them.

"It's rush hour," Zagreus explained. "It's seven in the morning. Everyone is out going to work." He drummed his fingers on the steering wheel, impatient as always when it came to heavy traffic. It'd be faster if he got out and *ran*.

With that particular thought in his mind, he made the executive decision to pull over, figuring if he was going to spend two hours sitting still, he may as well have breakfast in front of him. The little diner he'd spotted was charming enough that even Thanatos might have a good time, and Zagreus was certain the food there would be better than his gas station snacks.

"What is this place?"

It was absolutely *adorable* is what it was, all decked out in soft teal and bright red like it'd been transported straight from the 1950s. Zag bet it would look even better at night, with the neon sign over the door lit up.

"Well, Than, it's me introducing you to the most important and most delicious meal of the day."

"I don't want to eat anything," Thanatos said, but he followed Zagreus anyway as he greeted the hostess and was led to a booth in the far corner, where they could see all the traffic stuck at a snail's pace just out the window. The café was mostly empty, except for a few older ladies sitting at a table in the center of the dining area and a man at the counter who looked as if he may have been doing the same thing they were and waiting on the morning rush to die down.

Zagreus picked up a menu, which was protected with yellowing laminate that was cracked on the sides. The contents were fairly standard, and exactly the sort of thing Zagreus would want to show a foreign friend to introduce them to American Food.

In his head, that friend was not a grumpy deity who refused to use his physical form to do something as lowly as eating.



"I'm making you try some of my pancakes," Zagreus announced, after Thanatos was surprisingly polite in asking the waitress for a cup of tea, even managing to bestow upon her a small smile. Huh. Zagreus had thought his mouth was fixed in a permanent pout. He looked nice when he smiled, even if it did emphasize the lines under his eyes a bit.

"I'm not a fan of sweets," Thanatos said.

"Ha!" Zagreus accusingly pointed a coffee stirrer at him, and Thanatos went back to his usual look of vague annoyance (maybe that was only ever pointed at Zagreus, though). "If you're not a fan of sweets, that means you *do* have preferences when it comes to food. Which means you eat. Aside from when I make you."

Thanatos, irritated with Zag's idle fiddling, plucked the coffee stirrer out of his fingers and set it aside. "I'm told ambrosia tastes different to everyone

who tries it, based on your particular tastes," he said. "I'm also told it usually tastes sweet. It doesn't, for me. That's the only reason I know."

"Huh. Maybe I'll try it, give you my review for comparison."

"It'll probably taste like your terrible snacks."

Zagreus kicked at him under the table, and was about to explain that he'd bought those particular snacks because they were quite offensive, and that he didn't actually prefer them, when the waitress returned with Thanatos' cup of tea. He thanked her, smiled again, and Zagreus wondered what she thought of the brilliant gold of Thanatos' eyes.

As if proving his point, Thanatos let the tea bag sit in the water far too long, and then drank it with no sweetener whatsoever.

He was halfway through with it when Zag's breakfast arrived, and he looked at everything with the same sort of dubious intention with which he'd faced any other food Zagreus had offered him. He wasn't sure if this was a food thing or a 'not trusting Zag' thing.

"You don't actually have to try it, if you really dislike it," Zagreus said, one of his mother's sternly-worded reminders about not insisting people do something just because Zag enjoyed it ringing in his ears.

Thanatos shook his head, and unwrapped the paper-napkin-encased silverware with the same kind of quick, deft movements he used to wield his weapons. "It doesn't actually smell bad," he said, which had Zag checking over his shoulder in hopes that the waitress hadn't heard Thanatos giving backhanded compliments to the establishment.

He only tasted a single bite of Zag's pancakes (deftly avoiding any part Zagreus had already drenched in syrup), and although the look on his face was substantially unimpressed, Zag still asked, "good, right?"

"Significantly better than whatever you were eating before. This actually tastes as though it's meant to be consumed."

"Progress," Zag decided, and had absolutely no trouble eating the rest of his meal without Than's assistance.

Zagreus checked his phone sporadically, waiting on absolutely anything from his mother. Because they'd been traveling during the middle of the night, he hadn't called her, but he'd texted to tell her that they were alright but that the plane trip was out, and they were driving instead. By now, Persephone should have been awake for a good few hours already, but there was nothing. It sank a heavy weight of worry into the pit of Zag's stomach, as he wondered whether the beings that had come after him might have showed up at the farmhouse as well.

Thanatos, who had been looking out the window, kicked Zagreus under the table and prompted him to, "look, there."

He saw nothing more than the lines of traffic and the wooded area on the other side of the road. "What am I supposed to be looking for?"

"There was an arrow, there." Than pointed, and Zag still saw nothing. "It's gone, now."

"An arrow?"

"Yes, as in, the kind used as a weapon."

The clarification had been necessary, but Thanatos' particular tone of disdain wasn't. "Maybe it's bow-hunting country out here, I dunno." Zagreus had never much been one for any sort of hunting.

"Not unless ordinary bows have arrows that glow bright green."

Zagreus only shrugged. "They might. Maybe for aiming or finding your arrow after you've shot it or something."

Thanatos only sighed. "It's Artemis. I know that much. We have to go—"

"Uh, no, we have to pay first."

Than, who did not understand how restaurants worked, was already headed for the door. Well. Zag would catch up.

"That waitress wanted me to give you her phone number," he said, jogging to reach Thanatos, who was already at the far end of the parking lot and about to cross the road.

"Why would I need to contact her?"

Traffic was still nearly at a standstill, which meant nobody was even bothered by them walking straight across the road with no regard for the crosswalk. At least, Zag hoped nobody was bothered.

"She thought you were attractive, that's why."

"I'm not the type of god who's interested in romantic relationships with mortals." It was a sentence that would have sounded entirely conceited to anyone who didn't know the literal fact of it.

"Huh. I suppose I must be. Everyone I've dated has been mortal, unless far more people are hiding things from me." Plus, Zagreus had always been under the impression that he was just as mortal as any of the people he had been in a relationship with. "Anyway, I told her we were from out of town."

He didn't tell Than the entire truth of it.

"Ah, well, he and I... uh."

"Oh my god. He's your boyfriend, isn't he? I'm so—so sorry."

"What? No! We just. We're not from around her, all right, we're just on a road trip."

"Oh, that's cute!"

"It's not... agh. I better go catch up with him."

Yeah, Thanatos didn't need to know.

There wasn't a path through the little wooded area on the other side of the road, which meant they were tromping through leaf litter and undergrowth, a task which Zagreus' sneakers were not up to. Than seemed to be doing fine in his combat boots, and then he also started floating once they were out of eyesight from the road.

"Can I float around like that?" Zagreus asked, after almost rolling his ankle again.

"Probably not."

"Dammit." He tripped over a root, catching himself by grabbing onto Thanatos' arm before he would have gone stumbling into a nearby thorn-bush.

Thanatos stopped moving when they were in a thicker part of the woods, the morning sun all but blocked out by the cover of the leaves. It was cooler in here, and the temperature had Zagreus folding his arms to conserve warmth. He glanced about, but the view was the same on all sides. Trees, trees, maybe some bushes, and more trees. Nothing felt supernatural, the sound of birds and other animals going about their lives as normal filling the air.

"What did we go in here for?" he asked, staring at a pair of squirrels chasing each other through the branches overhead.

"Just wait."

Thanatos looked entirely incongruous here, even in his most mortal of forms. Black and white and gold, not an inch of him belonging in the forest. His skin even seemed grayer against the vibrant green of the foliage.

Zagreus was about to remark on it, when he heard a little hiss of sound from above, followed by the *thunk* of something hitting the tree to the immediate left of Zagreus' head.

In the moment it took Zagreus to realize that the thing which had hit the tree was an arrow, sunk in almost to the fletching, which could have gone directly into Zag's head, Thanatos had come to stand in front of him. He had his hands up, a gesture of peace, surrender, very unlike the way he'd faced anything else which had attacked them so far.

"Artemis," he said, looking at what first appeared to be simply more trees, but, upon closer inspection, the branches were hiding a woman, well-camouflaged with her green hair and the muted colors of her clothing. She was crouched in the V of two branches, a bow in one hand, her fingertips already reaching for another arrow. "Stop shooting. He's the one you came here for."

For a moment, she just frowned at Zagreus, looking at him critically in a way Dionysus and Hermes had not. Zagreus got the feeling she was more difficult to impress.

"You honestly *want* to go to Olympus?" she asked, loosening her grip on her bow. He wasn't entirely reassured.

"I'd rather stay home, in truth," Zagreus said, "but if it's between that and my father's cronies killing me, I think I'd prefer not being killed."

It got a nod out of her, jerky and a little awkward. "You concern me," she said, "but mostly because upon discovering that there's a son of an Olympian running about in the mortal world, my father began suggesting that I marry you." Her eyes rolled. "As if my years and years of not marrying men and instead spending time in the woods with my nymphs hasn't given him enough hints."

"You're my cousin, though, aren't you?"

"We're gods," she said, as if that explained anything, and swung herself out of the tree, landing neatly enough that she didn't make a sound. "But, as long as you're not planning to go along with Zeus'... plans, I suppose I can help you."

"No, I, uh. Don't think I'm your type." Zagreus glanced at Thanatos, who was facing away from them, arms folded, leaning against a tree and doing his best impression of somebody who wasn't listening in. "I don't think you're mine, either."

The tiniest of smiles crept across her face. "There, now, if only my father could come to a logical conclusion that easily."

Despite the fact that Artemis seemed to have decided to like him, Zagreus still flinched when she reached for her quiver, and she grinned. Rather than nocking the arrow, she presented it to Zagreus, the faint green glow he'd seen disappearing into the trees emanating from the arrowhead.

Zagreus reached to take it, but as soon as it brushed his fingertips, it disappeared. "What—"

"It's my gift to you," she said. "When you next use your weapon against an enemy, my arrows will be with you."

Well. It seemed about as logical as Dionysus' promise to give his enemies a hangover. Now. If only his aim was as good as hers. He thanked her, dropping his hand from where it was still hanging uselessly in the air before him, as if the arrow would reappear in his palm.

"Do you happen to know who we're supposed to be meeting next?" Thanatos asked. "Dionysus had no clue."

"That's because I didn't tell him where I was going. I knew I'd find you, I'm the best tracker in the world. Now. You want me to tell you exactly where Aphrodite is? Because she's up next."

Thanatos groaned. "If you must."

"Don't get along well with Aphrodite?" Zagreus asked him, as they hopped back in the truck, ready to go now that the roads were relatively clear.

"She's just so..." Thanatos waved a hand in the air in a way that described approximately nothing. "I'd rather talk to Ares. At least he seems to respect me, professionally."

"Well, he's War, right? And you're Death. Makes sense to me." Zagreus set a hand on the back of Than's seat so that he could crane around to check behind them as he backed out.

Thanatos shrugged. "He's still an Olympian, so."

They were driving through the country, and the wide open fields made Zagreus feel at least a little more at home. It did also have him on high alert for his phone ringing, in hopes that his mother would get in touch. He kept his music relatively low, because while Zagreus couldn't drive without something playing on the radio, he could at least do his best not to irritate Thanatos with it.

"Hey, what's the Underworld like?" he asked Thanatos. "If I'm half-from-there I ought to know at least a little about it."

"Darker than this," Than said, and Zagreus realized that he had a hand up to shade his eyes. "I'm never quite used to how much light there is on the surface. The Underworld is very... businesslike."

"Going to be honest, that's not the adjective I thought you'd use. I was imagining a bunch of creepy caves under the ground."

Thanatos scoffed. "It's not all *caves*. Your father is the wealthiest god in the pantheon, the House of Hades is basically a palace. But it is darker. Ixion, the... well, sort of the sun, is kind of a pale green." He made a frustrated little noise before he continued. "It's hard to describe it all. That'd be like somebody asking you what Earth's like."

Zagreus had sort of been hoping Thanatos *would* ask something of the sort. At least then they'd have a conversation, a little more back-and-forth. "All right, then. What's your favorite place in the Underworld like?"

"I don't know if I have..." he said, and then corrected himself. "Hm. Well, there's two, probably. Both in the House of Hades, I don't do a lot of traveling up-or-downriver. One of them is near the center of the house, where Lord Hades' throne is, but it's around a corner, so you can't really hear the shades petitioning him or Hypnos doing... whatever Hypnos does, from there. It's this little balcony, overlooking the Styx. It's, I don't know, peaceful. Watching the river."

He hadn't taken Thanatos as the kind of person who would enjoy nature, but there was a sort of calm to his face even as he imagined it. He'd closed his eyes, his head tipped back a little. It made the lines under them fade a little.

"The other one, I don't know if I can say it's my favorite place still, because I haven't been there in years. When Lady Persephone was still at the House, though, she had a garden, sort of off to the side. I saw plants and things when I went up to the surface, of course, but I'm always up here for work. There was never time to just enjoy them." His eyes slid open again, and he was frowning. "When she left, Hades closed it off. Nobody's been inside since. I hope everything hasn't just died."

"I hope so, too," Zagreus said. What kind of garden you could plant in somewhere that only had a 'sort-of-sun,' he didn't know. But he'd always appreciated his mother's handiwork.

Of course, the likelihood that he'd see the garden was low.

"Mother's garden here—on the surface—is lovely, too. The sunflowers just came up, I've never known how she manages to get the rows of them so neat. Maybe..." his grip tightened on the steering wheel. "Maybe I could show you sometime. If you're not too busy working, the next time you're up here."

It was somewhat difficult to imagine Thanatos standing amid a field of sunflowers, but Zagreus liked the idea of it. He pictured Thanatos as he'd first seen him, dressed in flowing black robes with long hair that fell in gentle waves about his shoulders. All the gilded ornamentation he wore would shine bright in the mid-afternoon sun.

Or maybe they'd visit at sunset, so that Thanatos didn't have to squint so much. Or Zagreus would have to get him some sunglasses, which would look ridiculous with the rest of the ensemble.

Thanatos' voice was quite small when he said, "I could probably find some time."

— — —

They rarely stopped. They rarely needed to, both with the fortitude to take such a journey with ease. But, Zagreus was becoming predictably antsy from time to time, and sitting in the driver's seat all day was really pushing it.

It was past noon when he finally got out of the truck, stopping it by the side of the road just to stand and stretch for a while. He felt like he could run for miles, although his legs would probably cramp up unless he spent a lot more time stretching out the effects of a half-day's worth of sitting in place.

Thanatos leaned out the passenger side window. "What are you doing."

Zagreus bent to touch his toes, delighting in the pull of muscles he hadn't used in hours. "Stretching!"

"Why would you need to—" Thanatos cut himself off, shaking his head as if he was accepting this as another of Zagreus' many annoying and unusual traits.

"Get out of the car and join me," Zagreus said, "it'll do you some good. Probably."

"I would prefer that you get back in," Thanatos said. "We need to keep moving."

"Alright, yes, okay."

Thanatos' face looked strange when Zagreus got back into the car, a different color than his usual dead-looking gray. There was gold on his cheeks, like glitter. Maybe that was what happened when the god of Death got a sunburn.

— — —

They stopped again just as the sun was setting, and Thanatos did get out of the car this time, grumbling about how in the world mortals managed to travel around like that for their whole lives. They were at another gas station, the tank running dangerously low, and Zagreus was considering walking across the street to what looked like a sandwich shop to grab something for dinner.

He liked towns like this, in the middle of the countryside with no skyline but for scattered trees, the sunset free to turn everything golden unobstructed.

"Come here," he said to Thanatos after a moment, pulling him in with an arm around his shoulders. "I want to take a picture."

"Why," Thanatos grumbled as Zagreus lifted his phone and flipped the camera around so that he could capture his smiling face and Than's slightly bewildered expression, which was better than his usual bored look.

"I want to send it to my mother!"

"She probably can't contact you right now." Thanatos folded his arms, looking down to examine his nails. Zagreus wasn't certain whether they were painted black or if they always looked that way. "She's worried about doing anything that might allow Hades to track you."

"You're telling me the god of the underworld is tapping into my text messages?"

Thanatos shook his head. "No. But messages between gods are powerful things. Those, one can track."

So, don't send her the photo. Fine. He was at least going to post it up where somebody else could see it, then. Instagram was his peers' preferred location for bragging about whatever they were doing. "Alright, then instead I will attempt to pretend like I'm having a very exciting summer of

traveling just like my friends who are backpacking in Peru. Or Argentina. It might've been Argentina."

"I would think this would be pretty exciting, for a mortal." There was a loud click as the gas pump switched off once the tank completely filled, and it made Thanatos jump.

"No, they're on mountains, so it's more exciting, see?" Zagreus turned his phone around to show Thanatos the photo, and he just squinted at it. Maybe he needed glasses.

"How do you know these people?"

Zagreus went back to captioning his own picture as he answered. "High school. It's actually kind of funny, freshman year, Taylor and I went out—that's the girl in that picture, and then sophomore year I dated Jesse, he's the guy. And then apparently at some point the two of them decided to date each other. So I think if they get married and have a wonderful life together then they've got me to thank." He finished up and returned his attention to his truck, setting the gas pump back where it belonged before reaching in through the front window to snag his wallet out of the driver's seat.

Thanatos followed him as he headed across the street for dinner. "Mortals have a lot of relationships," he griped, apparently lumping Zagreus in with the mortals on this one.

"And you don't? I'd expect that if gods lived so long, you'd date a lot of people." He also knew enough Zeus facts to know he was at least somewhat correct.

"Not all of us." Thanatos gave Zag a puzzled look as he opened the door for him to enter the café first.

"So, you've never dated anybody? Never even like... fooled around a bit?" The question sounded disgustingly teenager-y even as he asked it, but he supposed that, since he was a teenager for another year yet, he could be excused.

Than was back to frowning. "No."

Zagreus only half-read the menu board he was looking at. There were still a few people in line before them, so he had some time to figure out what he wanted. Than probably wouldn't eat anything. "Well, you've at least kissed somebody, right?" He wouldn't have made such an assumption if he was talking to somebody his own age, but Thanatos was as old as life itself.

"No, Zagreus, I have not."

"Huh." Never? Really? He wanted to ask a half-dozen questions. *Have you ever wanted to? Are there just not a lot of dating prospects in the Underworld? Is being Death considered severely unattractive among the gods? Because it sure isn't your face that's the problem.* "Do you want a sandwich?" Well, that was probably the best question he could have asked, if he wanted to not have a hole glared in the side of his head by an angry god of death.

"Hm. Do they have tea?"

"Probably iced tea. I'll get you one if they have unsweetened."

A rare smile played across Thanatos' face. "You're learning." Nobody had ever kissed those lips.

God, Zagreus needed to stop thinking about that.

3. Chapter 3

Summary for the Chapter:

Zag gets his ass kicked, Aphrodite's making assumptions, and there was only one bed.

Notes for the Chapter:

Hello and welcome to what is honestly maybe my favorite chapter. I just like tenderly bandaging your crush's wounds while gently admonishing him for getting hurt.

Zagreus had to stop the truck half a mile from their destination in the middle of the road when what looked like an enormous spinning ball of razorblades sliced across the middle of the street. They were still in the country, wheat fields on either side, and he could see the weapon go slicing off into the field, probably drawing crop circles.

"What the *fuck!*?"

Thanatos growled and undid his seatbelt. "Alecto. Well, if you'd like to see what the Olympians' blessings did to that gun of yours, come on."

The idea of Thanatos actually inviting him to join the fight was an unusual one, but Zagreus scrambled for Exagryph, hopping out of the driver's seat and looking around for their target. He assumed the spinning blade thing wasn't sentient, but who knew. He had almost been dragged to hell by a disembodied arm yesterday.

"What are we up against?" he asked Thanatos, who had his scythe at the ready this time.

"Another Fury. Meg's sister. She's worse."

Zag didn't like any of that.

There was a sound from behind him and he turned to aim, only to stagger back a half-step as he caught sight of the being before him.

She was definitely worse.

While Meg had looked like a human, albeit a blue one with a wing and the same kind of unearthly beauty Thanatos and Nyx possessed, this Fury was nothing of the sort. Her face was sunken, skin shriveled over, like a corpse half-rotted away. Bright green pinpoints of light shone within empty eye sockets, and her voice shook as she spoke. "M...mm...murderer."

"We definitely did not kill her sister permanently, right!?" Zagreus ducked out of the way as this new Fury came rocketing toward them.

"Dammit!" A flash of green as Thanatos vanished and reappeared, barely avoiding eruptions of eerie fire that burst in a row down the road. "It's both of them!"

A second figure appeared just as Zagreus aimed and fired at the skeletal woman, his shot tearing through her wing and making her screech. It was followed up by a glowing spectral arrow that pierced her wing just to the side of Zag's shot, and then vanished—Artemis' boon.

The other Fury stood on top of a billboard just to the side of the road, which was advertising, of all things, billboard space. Apparently not in high demand around here. She cackled, high and sharp, lashing a whip that looked like Megaera's as she stood and watched the proceedings.

"It really was you!" she shouted. "When they said Thanatos offed Megaera, I didn't believe it! She's gone soft, losing to trash like you."

Zagreus swore Thanatos rolled his eyes. "Shoot her. Please."

"Tisiphone can take care of you all by herself! She doesn't even need me to kick your sorry asses!"

Tisiphone, who must have been the skeletal Fury, was not looking so good, in fact. Her wing being injured meant she'd fallen to the ground, and she

stumbled, a hazy purple aura surrounding her. Dionysus' gift to him was working as well, it seemed.

"You take her, I'll get the yelling one," Zagreus said, trusting his own long-range weaponry more than Than's.

Alecto dodged his first shot, and it pierced through the billboard behind her. The accompanying arrow from Artemis didn't miss, though, and hit her in the shoulder while Zagreus aimed again. His second shot hit, but the Furies were apparently not to be taken out by mere bullets, even if they were magically enhanced and even if they did hit them directly in the stomach.

She let out a roar of rage that was unlike anything Zagreus had ever heard and spun her whip in a circle, sending out red sparks with every rotation. They pulsed with the energy of her anger, and they stung more than the projectiles Megaera had shot at him, turning his skin hot and then cold and then hot again where they connected. He shook it off, lifting Exagryph again. There was no time for Thanatos to come to his aid again now. He was busy with his own battle—Zagreus had to learn how to handle these things alone.

Another hit. Dionysus' effect on her seemed to compound, and she stopped in the middle of her volley of fire, shaking her head, growling and grunting her rage as she tried to shake off the effects of his attack.

She came at him again and Zagreus realized two things very quickly.

One: she was the source of the rotating blades that were going to seriously confuse the farmers tomorrow morning.

Two: she could summon more of them.

Zagreus shot at her again just as the spinning blades whirred past him, and he didn't feel the gut-wrenching pain of it slicing his left arm from elbow to shoulder until after he had landed three more hits.

"Zagreus!" Thanatos had taken care of his target, apparently.

Zag's shots hadn't entirely destroyed Alecto, but the combination of Artemis' support fire and Dionysus poisoning her from within had her sinking into a pool of red the same way Megaera had done. Zagreus fell to his knees. At the very least, they were no longer under attack. He clapped his hand to his opposite arm, clutching at the wound tracing up the back of it as he tried to staunch the bloodflow.

Thanatos was swearing, half of it his weird Underworld swearing and half words he'd picked up from mortals. "Zagreus. Why—*how*?"

"You're going to have to be a bit more specific." If he could still get full sentences out, he wasn't doing too poorly.

"You're *bleeding*. Gods don't bleed. *Why are you bleeding?*"

Zagreus squinted at him. Thanatos looked deely concerned, kneeling beside him, his hand joining Zagreus' on his wounded arm. Even in the midst of battle, he hadn't seen such fear wrought on Than's face. Dammit, he must really be looking bad. "I don't know, I've always bled when I get hurt. Skinned my knees as a kid and everything. Thanatos. We need to get somewhere safe—I've got a pretty heavy-duty first aid kit in the truck but we can't stop in the middle of the road."

Thanatos took in a breath, visibly composing himself. "Right. Somewhere safe. What about that motel we're supposed to meet Aphrodite at?"

"I... can you drive?" Zagreus certainly couldn't, and he wasn't walking a half-mile down the road, either.

Thanatos sized up the truck as if he was facing off against an enemy. "I know enough of the mechanics."

Zagreus wasn't really sure what 'enough of the mechanics' meant, but it'd have to do. "Right." Zagreus got in the passenger side, still holding his injured arm.

He hadn't bothered to do up the seatbelt, because that would require taking pressure off a still-bleeding wound, but he started to wish he had as soon as

Thanatos began driving. The truck lurched forward in a jerk and then stopped, and Zagreus was almost thrown into the footwell. Thanatos cursed, his strange little *blood and darkness* and then started up again.

Thankfully, they didn't hit any red lights, nor did they see any other cars, because Than crashing into somebody would really not improve this whole evening. His parking job was less than ideal, taking up two, possibly three spots in the lot. At least he hadn't gone over the curb.

"Right," Zagreus said again, taking a deep breath which shuddered on his exhale. "Take my wallet, go in there, and get us a room."

"Can't you—"

"I'm covered in blood," Zag reminded him, as gently as he possibly could. "Just ask them for a room, for one night, and bring the key out here." Technically, he could have bandaged himself up in the front seat of his car, but he'd rather have a bathroom to wash out the wound. "Than. It's fine. Just don't be weird."

"Don't be weird," Thanatos scoffed, reaching for Zag's wallet, which was in the cupholder. "You know I usually only interact with humans who are on the brink of death, right?"

"Well, perhaps imagine they're on the brink of death, and maybe you'll feel better."

Thanatos made a strangely considering noise at Zagreus' sarcastic suggestion, and hopped out of the driver's seat like he had been just waiting to get out from behind the wheel. Zagreus really hoped Thanatos wasn't taking that idea to heart.



He leaned his head back and closed his eyes for just a moment. With nothing to focus on, his entire mind was absorbed with the pain in his arm, throbbing in time to his heartbeat. He usually healed up fast—cuts that on most people would warrant stitches were fine simply bandaged, and they

barely scarred. This one would probably be much the same. Didn't mean it hurt any less, though.

Did his ability to heal himself depend on his godhood? Was that also why, whenever the rest of his class in school came down with some cold, Zagreus always managed to avoid it? And why, despite running around through the fields in shorts every summer, he was never bitten up by the bugs? There were a thousand little things Zagreus had never connected to anything more than mortal, but now, he looked at them and wondered.

Zagreus tried to imagine his mother ever cutting herself, ever being pricked by the rosebushes, and came up with nothing. Perhaps Thanatos was right to be startled when Zagreus started bleeding. But if his mother was what Thanatos might've considered a 'normal' god and therefore did not bleed... why would Zagreus?

Thanatos startled him out of his musings by wrenching the driver's side door open, half of Zagreus' name out of his mouth before he stopped, realizing that Zagreus had lifted his head and opened his eyes. "Oh, good, you're alright."

"I appreciate your concern," Zagreus said. He twisted in his seat and managed to open his own door without letting go of his wounded arm, hopping out and nodding toward the backseat. "Get the first aid kit. It's behind the driver's side seat, that blue box—yes, that one, okay. Come on."

They'd parked quite close to the room they had been assigned, which was both fortunate and somewhat likely, considering how small the motel was. It didn't seem like the kind of place a god would hang around waiting for them, but then again, neither had the liquor store or the little strip of woods they'd found Artemis in. The door creaked when it opened and shut, and everything within looked as if it hadn't gotten an upgrade since the seventies, wood-paneled walls and sconces that barely gave off enough light to see by. There was a television, a big square one, with a list of channels taped to the frame.

There was also only one bed.

"You didn't think to ask for two?" Zagreus said, nodding at it as he headed for the bathroom. He stripped out of his T-shirt (the movement it required *hurt*, dammit) and turned on the sink, running cool water over the still-sluggishly-bleeding wound.

"I don't sleep, so, no." Thanatos followed him into the bathroom, which had not been built for two grown men to occupy it. He eyed the plastic shower curtain, which had been clear at some point but was now a cloudy yellow, and then Zagreus' wound, which was turning all of the water red.

"It doesn't seem so bad," Zagreus said, examining the cut, which was long but not deep. The edges of Alecto's weapon had been sharp enough to keep it relatively clean, as well. "But we ought to bandage it straight away." He didn't trust anything in this motel not to give him some kind of infection. He didn't trust *Alecto* not to give him some kind of infection. "I'll need some help, I can't really reach."

He sat on the bed with Thanatos at his side, pressing a pad of gauze to his arm as it had already started bleeding again. Thanatos' hands were chilly wherever they touched Zagreus, which was welcome. He was still overheated after the fight and the motel did not have air conditioning.

"I'm sorry," Thanatos said, following Zagreus' instructions to spread an antibacterial cream over the afflicted area, "I'm not very good at this. I'm not usually trying to heal people." He was perhaps leaned in a bit closer than he needed to be. Zagreus could feel Thanatos' knee against his hip where Than's leg was curled up on the bed. He was suddenly aware that he was half-dressed, and that Thanatos had taken off his jacket at some point.

"I suppose you are Death," Zagreus reasoned.

Despite his misgivings, Thanatos was quite efficient in wrapping up Zag's wound, although he was a bit confounded trying to seal it off with surgical tape. "Cut that out," he said, because Zagreus was giggling at the god of Death getting tape stuck to his fingers.

Thanatos' face was starting to take on that golden tinge again, the one Zagreus only saw on rare occasions but seemingly appeared whenever

Thanatos was flustered or embarrassed. Zagreus couldn't help but to reach out, to feel if his cheek was warm. To his astonishment, Thanatos did not jerk away.

"Are you... are you blushing?" Zagreus asked.

"No." The gold brightened. His skin was indeed warmer than usual under Zagreus' fingertips.

"You absolutely are." Zagreus smiled as Thanatos tried to duck his head. "It's all right, I would be too, if I were faced with me being all shirtless and manly and injured in a fight to the death."

"I am *not*." His face did not seem to agree with his protests.

"It's all right," Zagreus repeated. He leaned in, very slowly putting his head against Thanatos' shoulder, so that he could push Zagreus away if he wanted. He did not.

"It's not." Thanatos settled an arm around Zagreus' back, then lifted his hand away as if he regretted doing so, then put it back, slightly higher up, between his shoulder blades. "I can't... you're headed to Olympus as soon as we get to the ocean. I'm not going to see you again for a very long time." He hadn't denied that he'd ever see Zag again.

Zagreus took a deep breath, trying to memorize the smoky, incense-like scent that clung to Than's skin. "But if we pretend that wasn't true." He almost couldn't hear his own voice. His face rested at the neckline of Than's T-shirt—if he turned his head at just the slightest angle, his mouth would be on Than's neck. *Nobody had ever kissed this man.*

Thanatos held him without so much reservation now, both arms around him, carefully avoiding the recently-bandaged wound. He'd curled his hands into fists, so that his palms weren't fully settled against Zagreus' bare skin. So that he couldn't really feel it. Thanatos was at once ancient and precisely Zagreus' own age.

"I can't pretend that isn't true." His mouth was so close to Zagreus' ear. "If I do, I'll never let you go."

Then don't let me go, Zagreus wanted to say to him. Instead, he said, "of course you wouldn't. I'm quite a catch."

"Ugh."

Zagreus pretended he didn't feel the barely-there flutter of Thanatos' lips against his cheekbone, but the spot he'd been almost-kissed burned even after Thanatos pulled away.

"Come on," Thanatos said, "we're supposed to be meeting another of your relatives, here."

The spell-bound moment truly was broken, then. Zagreus rifled through his bag and pretended he did not have feelings for Thanatos. "Give me a second to find something to wear, I'd like to not show up shirtless and the other one is covered in blood."

On second thought, he probably could have shown up shirtless.

The pool at the motel was drained, the bottom of it covered in some sort of disgusting-looking sludge. Despite this, there was somebody lying on one of the least-broken of the old lounge chairs, which had been dragged from the haphazard pile the rest of them had been shoved into. Also, Zagreus swore the lighting out here had been ordinary white fluorescents when they came in. It was now pink.

The woman was wearing the tiniest bikini Zagreus had ever seen in his life. Honestly, she may as well have just been naked. The fact that she was also wearing quite a lot of jewelry made her seem even more naked, and Zagreus would have politely looked away, if there wasn't something about her that forced him to stare directly at her.

"Why hello, hello! You must be that little godling everyone's been making such a fuss over." She tossed her hair over one shoulder, and Zagreus

realized that it wasn't just taking on the quality of the light, her hair actually *was* pink. Her eyes were an even brighter shade of magenta.

"Um. I suppose?" he answered, his words coming out alongside a nervous laugh.

"Come closer, my dearest." She beckoned him forward with one perfectly-manicured hand.

Zagreus almost tripped over his own feet, but managed not to go sprawling as he dropped into another chair nearby. It wobbled unwelcomingly. "So, uh. Lady Aphrodite, I presume?" As if it could be anybody else.

"Of course!" She then looked past Zagreus to Thanatos, who was standing a distance away, as he had during most of Zagreus' encounters with the Olympians. "Good to see you too, Thanatos. My, what a surprise, but you two do make a lovely couple!"

"We're not—"

"That isn't—"

Aphrodite ignored their protests, examining her nails instead. "If you say so. But I'm not here for that, now am I?" She returned her attention to Zagreus, who was starting to realize the full force of her attention was unsettling. "Well, my little godling, it does seem the last fight you were in treated you quite badly, didn't it?"

"Oh. Yes. I mean, I'll be fine."

"Of course you will, now that I'm here. I'll get you back on your feet even faster than usual!" She unfolded herself from the lounge chair, and Zagreus realized she was quite tall, perhaps even taller than Dionysus or Hermes. "Plus, the effects of this are lasting, so anything else you do to heal yourself up will work twice as well. I guarantee it."

"Well, thank you, that's quite—"

He was cut off by her leaning in to kiss him on the forehead, and then she disappeared in a shower of giggles and pink sparkles.

He sneezed, having apparently inhaled some glitter.

"I. Well. She was. Um." If he could form a sentence longer than two words, that would be just fantastic.

"You've got lipstick on your face," Thanatos observed, pointing at the spot on his own forehead.

Zagreus scrubbed at it, hoping the memories of the Goddess of Love calling the two of them *a lovely couple* would disappear along with the kiss mark.

"It's still there," Than informed him.

"Let's just get back to the room."

He almost tripped *again* getting up and leaving the deserted poolside.

When they returned to the room, Thanatos insisted that Zagreus sleep, so that Aphrodite's magic could do its work. Zagreus, who was uncharacteristically exhausted, agreed.

He hadn't exactly thought to pack pajamas when he was rapidly preparing for this trip, so his T-shirt and boxers would have to suffice. He *had* remembered to bring his toothbrush, thank god.

In the bathroom, when he glanced at his reflection for just a second, he thought he caught a flash of black in the white of his right eye.

He jerked away, blinked, and peered at his reflection again. He thought about the laurel wreath, still tucked into its box. If he had grown up with the knowledge of who he was, would the dark eye look ordinary to him?

He washed his face and did not look into the mirror after.

Thanatos, Mr. "I Don't Sleep so I Didn't Ask for Two Beds", was standing awkwardly in the middle of the room when Zagreus returned.

Zagreus took the left half of the bed, so that his injured arm would not accidentally bump into Thanatos in the night. "Come on," he said, lying on top of the quilt and pulling the blanket folded up at the end of the bed over himself instead. He'd sweat through the mattress if he was underneath an entire quilt. "Seriously, Than, you standing there staring at me is creepy. Get in here, it's alright."

"I don't—"

"It's *fine*. I know you don't don't *need* to sleep, but today's been exhausting."

Thanatos left his jeans on as he got onto the bed beside Zagreus, which couldn't have been comfortable, but perhaps Thanatos had some sort of godly resistance to uncomfortable sleepwear. Zagreus had expected him to turn away, facing the bathroom door, but he lay face-to-face with Zagreus instead, his golden eyes turned what could have been an ordinary brown by the darkness.

Zagreus wondered what he would say if Thanatos had been an ordinary boy his age. If he truly had just been a son of one of Persephone's friends. Zagreus probably would have been telling him his eyes looked pretty.

"You're not sleeping," said Thanatos.

"I know. I told you, I can't sleep with you looking at me like that. Close your eyes."

Thanatos obeyed, but did not immediately relax, the little furrow between his brows digging itself deeper. He startled and opened his eyes again when Zagreus set his thumb there, as if to rub the wrinkle out.

"Come here," Thanatos said, mindful of the still-stinging wound on Zagreus' arm as he reached out.

Given how Thanatos had been about, well, everything, Zagreus would have expected this to be awkward. Instead, he fit near-perfectly against Than's body, Thanatos' arm resting at the dip of Zagreus' waist, Zag's head tucked against Than's chest. It had been a while since he'd just cuddled somebody

like that, and even longer since he'd been the smaller person in that arrangement.

He'd forgotten how safe it felt.

— — —

Zagreus woke up having rolled over at some point in his sleep. This meant two things.

One: his arm had already healed up enough that it didn't hurt to lay on it.

Two: Thanatos was spooning him.

He froze, stopping himself from his normal morning stretch so as not to disturb the incarnation of Death snuggling him. This, Zagreus decided, was even better than the way he'd fallen asleep. Thanatos had an arm around Zagreus' chest, protective even in his sleep, and a leg thrown over his hips, which made Zagreus equal parts thankful for and resentful of the blanket he'd pulled over himself and the fact that Thanatos was still wearing jeans.

He hadn't expected Death to be so warm. He also was fairly certain Thanatos had mentioned not needing to breathe except to speak, but he could feel every soft exhale against the back of his neck, where Than's lips were inches from his skin.

Zagreus moved slowly, so as not to burst this moment by disturbing Thanatos. His hand drifted from its place lying innocuously on the mattress until he could fit his palm over Thanatos' hand against his chest, their fingers interlocking just the slightest bit. He held his breath. Thanatos, by all appearances, still slept, although Zagreus was certain the pounding of his heart would wake him, as loud and chaotic as it was.

He settled back in, making no effort to move but also certain he wouldn't drift off again, all too aware of every place Thanatos touched him. His hand was so close to Zagreus' heart. Zagreus sighed, and squeezed Than's hand as tight as he dared to.

"I know you're awake." *Oh*, his voice was so soft, almost difficult to hear, except that he was so close. "I woke up before you."

Then Thanatos, too, had made the conscious choice to stay exactly where he was at, holding Zagreus against his chest, half-covering his body.

"Shh. I'm definitely asleep," Zagreus said, refusing to open his eyes.

"Zag—"

"Just... stay like this with me. Just for a minute, okay?"

"Okay." Thanatos' hand, which had been hanging loosely in a facsimile of sleep, pressed tighter to Zagreus' chest, consciously holding him close.

He gave Zagreus a minute, and then a minute more. And Zagreus realized Thanatos was not going to let go, not until Zagreus made the choice.

Zagreus turned over to face him. He'd never wanted a kiss so desperately. He'd never been so afraid he'd mess it up, either.

Before he could ask if Thanatos felt the same, before he could even move, Thanatos pulled him in. This was not last night's embrace, with Thanatos afraid to irritate Zagreus' wound, afraid to fully touch him. Thanatos' hands were in fists again, but this time, it was not to lessen the amount of contact between them. It was to clutch at Zagreus' shirt, to hold him closer, every part of Thanatos pressed to every part of him.

Zagreus wanted to kiss him. Zagreus wanted to cry. He settled for running a hand over Thanatos' back, following the length of his spine.

"We should go," Thanatos said, sounding utterly resigned. The tone of his voice made Zagreus realize all his grumbling about Zag's food or choice of music hadn't been true irritation.

"Neither of us want to."

"I know." Thanatos hugged him close, almost too tight, before finally letting go. He was flushed so golden his face nearly matched his eyes. He wouldn't

look at Zagreus, heading for the motel room door instead to snatch his leather jacket off the handle and shrug it on, despite the warmth of the day.

Zagreus rubbed his eyes, headed to the bathroom, and willed his heart to stop racing.

— — —

Zagreus (7:43 A.M.)

Hi mum. I know I'm not supposed to contact you that often bc it isn't safe but...

Zagreus (7:44 A.M.)

Have you ever felt like you've met someone you can't let go of no matter what happens?

— — —

"Next time we end up in a big empty space," Thanatos told Zagreus while they stopped for gas and a convenience store breakfast that was bound to be mostly disappointing, "stop the car. I'm afraid of what your father's sending next, and... you need training."

"Okay," Zagreus said, which sounded more like an unintelligible gesture of acquiescence than a word, because he'd just shoved an entire mini muffin in his mouth. Thanatos' nose wrinkled, as he continued to be irritated by Zag's eating habits. "Don't judge me. Anyway, training in what?"

"Nyx dropped something off yesterday evening," Thanatos said.

"What? And you didn't tell me? Did she say anything about my mother—"

"She hasn't seen Persephone again." Thanatos raised his hands and Zagreus didn't realize he'd been advancing on him and was now right up in his face. "And she brought me your sword."

"My...? I have a sword?"

"You have a lot more weapons than that," Thanatos said, and Zagreus wondered where the hell all these weapons had been all this time. "But a sword is what I'll best be able to teach you to use."

Zagreus shook his head, jumping into the driver's seat. "Well, all right, but I definitely don't remember having a sword, so you can't make that face at me if I'm terrible with it."

"What face?"

"That one. That one right there."

— — —

It was almost midday when they found somewhere to stop—a deserted field, overgrown with wildflowers and grass that was so long it had tried out at the tips. Their only audience was a cohort of lazy bumblebees who paid them little mind, no humans around to notice a couple of strange-looking individuals swordfighting. Thanatos looked especially unusual because he'd reverted to the appearance he'd taken when Zagreus originally saw him, aside from his hair still being short. The sun, he said, bothered his eyes, and he wanted the hood.

"I think you just want to distract me with your whole... arms, and your chest being out, and. Yeah. You're trying to distract me," Zagreus argued.

"I can distract you without trying, Zagreus," Thanatos said, but his cheeks were golden again and by now Zag was pretty sure gods didn't get sunburned. He was just blushing again, which was also distracting. "Now. Come at me."

The sword Nyx had brought him was, according to Thanatos, named Stygius, and it was like nothing Zagreus had ever seen. Even the blade was red, and Zagreus was certain he saw a glimpse of something *alive* in the skull carved into the hilt. It was truly his own—a design like his laurels surrounded the skull and the sword was perfectly balanced for him.

He still could not hit Thanatos with it.

It would have been fighting dirty if Thanatos employed his teleporting, blinking across the field before Zagreus could land a strike.

However, Zagreus was so unpracticed that Thanatos didn't need to.

"I think I'm better with the gun," he said, and then Thanatos picked up his own sword, and tried to teach Zagreus how to dodge.

Thanatos was not a great teacher, in all honesty, keeping his instructions short and often leaving things out that a beginner would not intuitively know. The only reason Zagreus managed to advance in his training was that the more he fought with Stygius, the more *right* it felt.

He'd always been athletic, and usually picked up on physical activities faster than mental ones, but this was different. There was a connection between himself and his sword, an intrinsic knowledge of the weapon that allowed him to fight with better ease the longer he used it. Eventually, he stopped screaming while trying to dodge Thanatos, and Thanatos didn't have to stop halfway through each swing to ensure that he didn't hit Zagreus. Eventually, Zagreus started counterattacking.

Zagreus leapt up into the air, bringing the sword down and a supernova of power erupted from it, flattening all the grass in the immediate area. Thanatos, who'd had to float up into the air to avoid being hit, looked at him with raised eyebrows.

"Impressive."

"You think?" Zagreus was breathing hard, but it was from excitement, not exertion. Rather than tiring, the longer he fought, the more energized he felt. It was as if he could take on the world. How long had they been going for? Hours? Half a day, even?

"I know," Thanatos said. "It appears your abilities have attracted attention." He nodded, looking over Zag's shoulder.

It must not have been an enemy, because Thanatos was calmly watching, but the man certainly looked ready for a fight, carrying a curved blade and

wearing a helmet and full armor. Zagreus still held his sword ready as the man approached.

The newcomer laughed, sheathed his sword and tugged off his helmet. "There is no need to defend yourself against me, my kin. Not that it would do much good anyway." He shook his head, ran his fingers through his shock of white hair, which was shaved at the sides to show off a black laurel. Across his face was a white stripe, drawing attention to his eyes, which were as red as Stygius' blade. No wonder he'd called Zagreus his kin. There was at least some family resemblance.

"Lord Ares," said Thanatos, floating down until he was beside the newcomer. Zagreus recognized the name. This was the god of war.

"Thanatos. Always a pleasure to be in your company." Somehow, his voice sounded even more seductive than the goddess of love's. "You have a powerful new ally at your side, I see."

"No doubt, you've heard from your siblings of what Zagreus aims to do, joining you on Olympus." Thanatos seemed much more at ease around Ares than any of the other gods, although Ares was the most terrifying they'd encountered yet. Thanatos didn't linger in the background while Zagreus conversed with this relative; he stood by Ares and seemed as comfortable as he ever got.

"Indeed, I have. I must admit, I was loath to see such a thing happen, until I sensed your power and your connection with your blade," Ares said. "He seems worthy of your attention and your companionship, O Death."

"So you will help him on his quest?"

"If he accepts it." Ares turned his gaze to Zagreus, who had to stamp down hard on the deeply uncomfortable feeling. It was as if his attention carried the roar of battle cries on it. "Such a power can be dangerous to wield."

"I can handle it," Zagreus said, squaring his shoulders. "I'm strong enough."

Ares stepped closer, slow but not hesitant. Deliberate. He towered head and shoulders over Zagreus, and he pressed his fingertips to Zagreus' chin, tilting his face upward. At the angle they were positioned, Ares eclipsed the sun, a bright corona of light catching on the dark leaves of his laurel, making them appear almost metallic. "I know that you are, my kin. Yes. When you call upon me, I will give you the greatest of my power to destroy whoever opposes you."

There was a sharp twinge in the center of Zagreus' chest, like a blade had pierced him, but it faded immediately, leaving behind only a faint warmth and a roiling anger that Zagreus rarely felt. He willed himself not to flinch from the pain, and Ares nodded approvingly before turning, catching Thanatos by his shoulder on the way.

"Will I see you again soon?"

"I'm sure. You always manage to require my presence." Thanatos didn't say it like a joke, but Ares laughed anyhow.

"As is the nature of our professions, my lord."

A swift wind followed Ares away, the echoes of the war cries fading with him.

Zagreus shook his head like a dog shaking off water, because wow, that man was an *experience*. "Is he always like that, or is it just you?"

"Why would it be me?"

"Because he's unbelievably thirsty for you," Zagreus said, and was given another confused look in return. "He wants you. Bad."

Thanatos snorted, drifting down to his feet and waving a hand, returning himself to his usual appearance. "He has a fascination with death. It's somewhat understandable, as the god of war."

"He has a fascination with Death's ass," Zagreus corrected, heading for the truck now that their impromptu training session was over.

"Please don't ruin my only good working relationship with an Olympian," Thanatos groaned.

"Hey! It's not my fault he's horny for you!"

"He is *not*." Thanatos slammed the door unnecessarily hard.

"Yes he is. As a person with a lot of recent experience in the area of being horny for you—"

"Just drive, Zag."

"Oh, all right."

4. Chapter 4

Summary for the Chapter:

The physical embodiment of death is cute, Theseus is full of nonsense, Zagreus finally makes a move, and Cerberus is the best boy.

Notes for the Chapter:

Wooooo the final chapter is here! I hope everybody enjoys and thank you for joining me on this journey!

Thanatos was stealing Zag's fries. He absolutely was, Zag knew it, he just couldn't catch him at it. But every time Zag reached to grab another, he swore there were less than there had been. He kept looking at Thanatos at every stop, only for Thanatos to roll his eyes, like Zagreus was being needlessly suspicious even though *there had totally been more fries in here a second ago!*

"If you want some of my food, you could just ask for it," Zagreus said, keeping an eye on Thanatos in the rearview mirror as they stopped at a light. "No need to be sneaky about it."

"I'm not stealing your food," Thanatos said, sounding honestly annoyed with the accusation. Zag would have been convinced, had Thanatos not (with no stealth and a great air of sarcasm) taken one of his fries.

"Hey!"

"Alright, maybe I stole a couple." There was his smile again, the one that made Zagreus grin uncontrollably in turn.

Thanatos reached to snag another, but Zagreus caught his hand this time. Thanatos seemed to think this a better consequence than stealing Zag's food successfully, and he fit his fingers between Zag's, letting their hands rest next to the gear shift. Oh, yes. Much better. Good thing Zag was used to driving left-handed.

"Hey, sorry for teasing you about Ares," Zag said. "I just thought it was... sort of cute? He's got a crush on you that could be seen from space but you didn't notice, it's just..."

"I'm not interested in him," Thanatos said, looking resolutely ahead. "So I never paid attention."

"Are you interested in someone else, then?"

"And are you teasing me again, or are you really that stupid?"

"I just want to hear you say it," Zag admitted. "And I want to know if I can kiss you at the next red light."

This made Thanatos light up gold like somebody had spilled a bucket of metallic paint across his cheeks. "Zag, I—blood and—*look*." Thanatos let go of his hand, pointing out the window where one of the enormous summoning circles that heralded some monster bound to take Zagreus to the underworld was lighting up a mostly-empty mall parking lot.

"Shit. Do you think we could outrun them?" So much for kissing Thanatos next they were stopped.

"Not if it's who I think he's sending. Pull over."

He pulled into the parking lot but didn't bother parking between the lines, screeching to a halt as far away from the action as possible. He didn't want something else destroying the truck for good.

There were two figures inside the circle, which solidified the longer Zag looked at them. Leaping out of the truck, Zagreus grabbed Stygius, ready to test the blade in a real fight.

It was hard to see with all the half-dead streetlamps flickering, but one of the figures looked human-shaped, while the other was distinctly... not.

"Asterius!" cried the human-shaped one, "it pains me not to fight before a crowd, but if we must take down this scum, we shall do it to the best of our ability!" He projected like he was playing to the back row.

"What the hell," Zagreus said.

Thanatos had his face in his hand. "I don't suppose you'll see reason at least, Asterius?"

The second figure stepped closer, the fading light catching on an enormous axe he held. The weapon looked like it could sever Zag's head from his shoulders in one sweep, and he made careful note to stay away. The creature itself was recognizable: a minotaur. *The* minotaur, probably.

"We have been sent here on behalf of Lord Hades to return his son to the Underworld," said the minotaur, in a deep voice that was a little blurred from being spoken through an inhuman mouth. "Our quarrel is not with you, Lord Thanatos."

"Indeed!" said the man, brandishing a spear with a showy flourish. "Stand back, O Death, so that we might crush this hellspawn like the worm he is!" Yikes.

"Unfortunately for you, Theseus," said Thanatos, venom in his voice, "the Prince is under my protection." He put special emphasis on Zag's title, even though he'd never used it before, as if demonstrating to their combatant how little he cared for Zagreus being referred to as a worm and a hellspawn. If Zagreus was not focused on the fight at hand, he would have told Than it was cute how defensive he got.

"Then I suppose we will have to be rid of you both!" Theseus shouted, which was all the warning Zagreus got before he threw his spear. It whistled past Zag's ear, and instead of clattering to the asphalt as Zagreus would have expected, it floated in midair, and seconds later, it went flying back across the parking lot and into Theseus' hand.

As soon as Theseus was done attacking, the minotaur charged, head down, deadly horns pointed forward. Zagreus stood his ground with Stygius, but quickly discovered the distinct difference between Thanatos coming at him with a sword and a half-ton minotaur barreling at him with an axe the size of Texas. At the last moment, he leapt out of the way, twisting to hit the

minotaur from behind—his blade connected, but the wound was shallow and barely slowed the beast down.

Thanatos tried his usual trick of opening his magic circle in the ground beneath his enemies. The attack succeeded in a brilliant flash of light, but these warriors were not the crowd of wretches that had attacked them on the freeway. Although injured by Death's magic, they were not felled, and they launched into yet another attack.

Zagreus went after Theseus, and found his current fighting style was unsuited to an enemy on the defensive. Every one of his attacks glanced off Theseus' shield, and when Zagreus tried to sidestep and find a way around it, Theseus jabbed at him with the spear and forced him to put all his effort into blocking Theseus' attacks.

"Trade you?" Zagreus asked Thanatos, who only nodded, and shifted targets.

The minotaur being terrifyingly large meant he was an easier target than Theseus, and with Zagreus' strikes enhanced by the boons of the gods he'd met, the minotaur was wounded even from shallow, indirect hits. Dionysus' boon damaged him particularly well, sickly purple bubbling up from each wound, making a bright target for Artemis' arrows.

Thanatos dueled Theseus with his scythe, the extra reach of the blade giving him enough room to avoid spear and shield both. His strikes with it weren't as deadly as his magic, and Theseus fought him valiantly, landing a few hits of his own—god, Zagreus hoped Thanatos was better at taking hits than he was.

He couldn't be distracted by what Thanatos was doing, focused instead on his own target. The minotaur was fast, but he couldn't turn corners well, and if Zagreus ran just past the streetlamps, Asterius would charge right into them with a resounding clatter, taking a moment to shake his head and pick himself up after.

Zagreus tried this tactic once again, and discovered that the streetlamp had been considerably loosened on its post by the previous hit—this time, when

the minotaur rammed it, the entire thing went creaking and crashing down, with a rattle that shook the asphalt beneath them.

Zagreus took the moment of confusion as an advantage, turning and stabbing directly at the minotaur, putting all his weight behind the strike. It was enough.

The minotaur faded into white light with a soft grunt of pain and a softer cry of, "...king, I—"

"Asterius!" Theseus cried, lunging not at Zagreus, to avenge his fallen companion, but at Thanatos.

Shit.

Shitshitshit.

Thanatos, distracted by the fall of the streetlamp and the fall of the minotaur, took Theseus' spear to the side and was thrown out of his hovering position and onto the ground by the force of it. The sound of a weapon piercing flesh made Zagreus feel sick.

How badly was he hurt? What would happen to a god who was, well, *mortally* wounded? And what could Zagreus do about it?

Zagreus' attention was drawn from Thanatos to Theseus, who was laughing loudly and recalling his spear. He was *proud* of wounding Thanatos in such a way and *Zag was going to fucking kill him.*

"Ares!"

It was the anger, then, that burned away every other conscious thought Zag had, leaving him literally seeing red, a vortex of black and red and *pain* whirling around him as he called on War itself to destroy the man who thought he could take Thanatos away.

The vortex was made of a thousand tiny blades, tearing into Theseus' skin and sending him fading away in a shimmer of white the same way Asterius had gone. It wasn't enough. The rage still boiled in him—he wanted to see

Theseus come apart, fall beneath his blade, bloodied as Thanatos was. Every inch of Zagreus' skin was scalded with angry fire.

"Zag!"

Thanatos.

The vortex dropped away and Zagreus stumbled, blinking away the bright afterimages where Ares' power had swirled around him.

"Than...? You're alright?"

Thanatos was standing, a bit hunched over but otherwise all right, his hand pressed to a spot in his side where his shirt was torn but his skin was otherwise unharmed. "You really think someone like *him* could off me?"

"I..." Zagreus swayed where he stood, the effects of calling on Ares making him dizzy. "I didn't know what to think. Than—"

"I'm fine. Don't worry about me," he said, as Zagreus crossed the parking-lot-turned-battlefield and pulled Thanatos into his arms, heedless of the shimmering golden blood that was still all over Than's clothes and transferring to his own.

"I can't help it," he said. "I'm always worrying about people I love."

People I love.

He hadn't planned to say it that way, but he meant the words all the same.

Thanatos rested a hand on the back of Zag's head, holding him close. His fingers ran from Zag's crown to the nape of his neck, petting him a bit like one would touch a fearful animal. Strangely, it was one of the most comforting things Zagreus had ever felt.

"Let's keep going," Thanatos said, and Zagreus certainly wanted to be anywhere but right here.

"Yeah. Alright." Zagreus separated himself from Thanatos, pulling out of his embrace.

Every particle of him wished he didn't have to let go.

— — —

They stopped at a randomly-chosen fast-food restaurant so that they could change clothes in the bathrooms. Thankfully, Thanatos' blood looked more like gold paint, so they didn't look as if they'd come straight from an attempted murder, but it had gotten *everywhere*. There was even a drop on Zag's shoe. Hopefully Thanatos could conjure himself some clean clothes.

The restrooms were a single stall, which mean there was really no point in calling them the men's room or the women's room, but to avoid strange looks and uncomfortable conversations, Zagreus changed clothes in the men's room first and let Thanatos take his turn after, while Zag considered ordering a milkshake. This didn't feel like a milkshake type of occasion, though.

He stuffed his hand into the pocket of his sweatpants—it was finally cool enough that he didn't mind wearing them and they were the most comfortable thing he'd brought with—and pulled out a little folded-up piece of paper, the corners boxed-in and the surface fuzzed because he'd left it in his pocket when they went through the washing machine. He knew what was on it before he unfolded it, but he did it anyway, fingers smoothing over places where the numbers were broken up from water damage.

It was a phone number, from a girl he'd met while minding his mother's stand at the local farmer's market. She'd written it out on the bottom of her grocery list and torn it off to give to him, and Zagreus had been charmed by the idea of someone actually writing out their number instead of just asking him to put it in his cell. She hadn't written her name. He supposed she'd thought he would remember it.

He probably would have, if it hadn't been for all... this. Now, that moment felt ages away, and his momentary attraction to a girl he'd spoken to for ten

minutes felt like a single drop in the ocean that was his feelings for Thanatos.

He put it back in his pocket, if only because throwing it out felt oddly rude.

Zagreus didn't know what he'd expected Thanatos to emerge from the bathroom dressed in. The only thing Zag had seen him wear aside from his now-bloodied street clothes was his full godly attire, which would certainly be interesting to explain to whoever they next spoke to. Halloween costume, maybe? In July?

In any case, he wasn't expecting Thanatos to show up wearing his hoodie.

It had been hugely oversized on Zag so it was only slightly large on Thanatos, black with a red stripe from shoulder to hip. Thanatos was wearing it over the black leggings he'd had on when Zagreus first met him, his dirty clothes not tucked under his arm like Zag's were but vanished into the ether.

"Why are you staring at me?" he asked, nudging the toe of his boot against Zag's foot.

"Because you're wearing my clothes."

"It isn't like I had another shirt." He put his hands in the pockets, hunching his shoulders a little. "Besides. This is comfortable. Do you not want me to...?"

"Oh, no! No, the staring's not a bad thing." Zag headed for the door, leaning his back against it to hold it open for Thanatos to follow him out. "I'm staring because you look cute."

"I'm the physical embodiment of death," he said, as if in argument.

"Well, then the physical embodiment of death looks cute."

— — —

They had planned to drive through the night. Zagreus was as recovered as he would get, and so there was no reason for him to rest another night, no reason to extend their trip any longer. They were driving through a dark stretch of country, no streetlights or buildings in sight, when Zagreus determined that they needed to stop.

He pulled the truck off onto a dirt road that followed the edge of an empty field, and Thanatos turned his head, looking at Zagreus with a question he didn't need to speak aloud.

Why?

Why, indeed. Zagreus mentally listed the reasons.

One: Thanatos was curled up in the seat beside him, hood up, huddled inside of Zag's sweatshirt like he was a turtle in a shell but a thousand times cozier.

Two: Zagreus wanted to kiss him.

Three: Thanatos' fingers were playing with the end of the hoodie string, the bit Zagreus chewed on sometimes when he wasn't thinking.

Four: Zagreus *really* wanted to kiss him.

Five: Zagreus really *didn't* want to reach the coast tonight.

Sure, they might get attacked if they stayed in one place for too long, but *oh*, would one more night with him be worth the fight they'd get into. Zagreus turned the key, listened to his own breathing in the silence left behind in the wake of the engine shutting off.

Thanatos reached up to pull the hood off his head. "Zag," he said, and Zagreus thought of all the things he might say next. *Start the car. We need to go. No time to waste.*

He said none of it. He undid his seatbelt, reached across Zagreus' lap, and took the keys out of the ignition.

“You said you love me,” he said, and Zagreus’ throat tied itself in a knot.

“Yes.” There was no use in denying it, in saying he hadn’t meant it that way. The click of Thanatos removing his seatbelt was loud as a gunshot, the clink of the keys as he dropped them into the cupholder an explosion.

“I don’t know how I feel about you. Actually—that’s not true.” He laughed, then, high and thin, mirthless. “I feel *different*. You’d think that as old as I am—but I’ve never...” His eyes met Zag’s and there was something odd about him. He wasn’t confused, but he was *twisted up* somehow.

“Than...?”

Whatever he’d been wrestling with seemed to resolve, and he set his hand on Zag’s knee, squeezing a little bit too tight. “Zag. I love you. *I lo—*”

Zag didn’t hear the end of the word, but he tasted it.

Thanatos made a soft noise of surprise deep in his throat but he allowed Zagreus to kiss him, and then he wasn’t just allowing it, he was *kissing Zag back*, or trying to, as he didn’t seem to know what to do except to press closer.

Zag momentarily struggled with his seatbelt and blindly fumbled to undo it, leaning halfway across the gear shift just to *touch* Thanatos, one hand on his cheek and his other around his shoulders, guiding him into it, showing him how to angle his face. Thanatos’ soft noises of pleasure were going to be the death of him, his heart wrenched in a different direction by each one.

“Is this okay?” he asked, entirely too late. “Can I keep—”

Thanatos kissed him again, too hard, enough to make their teeth click. It was perfect. “Please don’t stop, I want you, *need you*, Zag.”

His heart was a thunderstorm, his breath was a hurricane, and he needed nothing more than to have every inch of Thanatos pressed up against every inch of him. “C’mom, come with me,” he said, grabbing the door handle and half-stumbling out of the truck. He nearly forgot to snag the blanket he kept

stowed under the backseat before hauling himself over the side and into the truckbed. Thanatos forgot his newfound habit of getting in and out of the truck using doors and teleported into the truckbed beside Zag instead.

Zagreus barely had a chance to spread out the blanket before Thanatos was on top of him, straddling his waist but not fully sitting down, holding Zag down with his hands on his shoulders instead. He kissed Zag again but didn't quite get the angle right, and Zagreus, charmed, couldn't help the laughter that bubbled out of his chest.

“What?” Thanatos leaned away, giving him an arch look that he could interpret even in the semi-darkness.

“Nothing. You’re cute. Come here, lie down with me.” Zagreus reached for him and Thanatos went willingly, allowing Zagreus to position him so that they were both on their sides. Zagreus couldn’t resist kissing him again and he didn’t need to, Thanatos eagerly leaning into it.

Thanatos made a sweet little gasp when Zagreus’ hand pushed up underneath his stolen hoodie, feeling over the firm muscle of Thanatos’ back. It was the perfect opportunity for Zagreus to deepen the kiss, the sweep of his tongue making Thanatos’ hands fist in Zag’s t-shirt.

Zagreus knew, in a distant part of himself, that he should take this slow, savor each moment. This was, by all accounts, their only night together. But he couldn’t stop, not when Thanatos was eagerly responding to his every touch, pulling him close until they were chest-to-chest. When Zagreus tried to pull away to ask Thanatos... something, he couldn’t remember what, Than chased after him.

He was a quick learner, every kiss more skillful than the last, and it made Zagreus want to accelerate and to slow down all at the same time.

He pulled back, breathing hard, pressing his fingers to Than’s lips to keep him from advancing further. “God...” Zagreus sighed, and it was less an expletive and more a recognition of the deity in his arms.

In all Thanatos' hundreds of thousands of years of existence, Zagreus was the first person to see him like this.

It made him want to get on his knees.

In worship, you know, not the other way.

Maybe the other way, a little bit.

“You’re shaking,” he realized, feeling the little tremors in Thanatos’ hands where they had come to rest on his chest.

“It’s a lot,” Thanatos said. He licked his lower lip, even though it was already wet from Zag’s affections. “I’ve never felt this way before.” His golden flush practically glowed in the night air and his voice was breathy in a way Zag wasn’t used to hearing.

“And how do you feel, exactly?” Zagreus asked, laying one of his hands over Than’s, drawing them close to his heart.

He’d expected something sweet, romantic. He got: *“Desperate. Wanting. I want you, Zagreus.”*

“Oh. Fuck.” He’d be lying if he said he hadn’t thought about doing much more than kissing Thanatos. “You are asking about... I mean, you want...” Zagreus trailed off, suddenly unable to bring up the idea of *sex*. He’d never felt more like a teenager.

“I never quite understood how the Olympians could get so greedy about romantic passions,” Thanatos said. “I think I see the reasoning behind that lust, now.”

Despite the darkness around them, Than’s eyes shone bright as stars.

“Tell me how you want me to touch you,” Zagreus said. “What you want me to do with you.”

“I don’t know,” Thanatos replied, a desperate sort of honesty in it. “All I want is *more*.”

If Zagreus were a gentleman, or if Zagreus were a mature, responsible adult who did *not* have a raging hard-on right now, he might have done things differently. He might have suggested a few different options, might have figured out exactly how much Thanatos knew about sex, because lack of experience did not equate lack of knowledge, *et cetera, et cetera*.

Zagreus was none of these things, and so he kissed Thanatos again instead.

Thanatos let the kiss continue, but used its distraction to push Zagreus onto his back. Sitting astride his waist, Thanatos looked every inch a god—his golden flush practically glowing, white hair turned to starlight. And he looked every inch a man, biting his lower lip, his hips jerking forward as if he couldn't help but grind against Zagreus. The friction had Zagreus' eyes rolling back, although he wanted nothing more than to look at Thanatos.

"I want *more*, Zag," he said again, hands shaking just a little as he reached for Zagreus.

And there was nothing for Zagreus to say but: "I'll give you anything."

More was Zagreus kissing Thanatos' neck and learning the sweet sounds that he made in response.

More was stripping out of their shirts, the chill of the night nothing in comparison to the heat smoldering between the two of them. It was Thanatos' hands all over him, a little bit clumsy but still the best thing he'd ever felt.

More was peeling Thanatos' leggings down to his thighs, shoving his own sweats and his boxers out of the way, and gripping tight to Thanatos' waist to keep him in place so that they could rut together, rhythmless and desperate, kissing to keep from shouting into the night.

More was Thanatos saying *I love you, I love you, I love you* while Zagreus brought him, and a few more times afterward, as if Zagreus wasn't already hearing echoes of it permanently in his head.

— — —

Thanatos could not have been asleep when Zagreus got up, hopped out of the truckbed, and got into the front seat, but he didn't stir, allowing Zagreus to leave his side without complaint. He left a kiss on Than's cheek to placate him and didn't shut the driver's side door all the way so it wouldn't slam and disturb Thanatos.

Once Thanatos was no longer looking at him, Zagreus collapsed into the driver's side seat, leaning his head against the steering wheel and wrapping his arms around himself, his breath coming out rather like a sob.

He collected himself, still shaky, and took his phone out of his pocket. It was a risk he did not want to take, fearing for his mother's safety as much as his own, but...

"*Zagreus?*" Her voice on the other end of the line was soft as if he'd woken her up. It was pure relief, knowing she was *okay*, she was still sleeping at regular hours and doing whatever needed doing on the farm by day.

He wiped at his eyes before answering. "Hey, mum."

"*What's wrong?*" she asked, because of course she could tell. He sat back, pulling his knees up to his chest.

"I think I'm about to do something very stupid," he admitted.

"*Is this about what you texted me? I'm sorry I couldn't reply.*"

God, that felt like it'd been ages ago. "Yeah. I... That was about Than. Thanatos."

"*Hmm.*" He could almost see her nodding, that soft, sage look that she always held in her eyes whenever she realized she knew her son nearly as well as she knew herself. "*Nyx tells me he came for your sword.*"

"Oh, yes. He did do that."

"*She also said she'd never seen him so enamored with another person.*"

"Enamored? Really?" Zagreus couldn't help but turn to look out the back window, even though Thanatos was still lying down and Zag couldn't see him. "Wow, I... but, yeah. Mother, he... he told me he loves me. And I don't even think I could begin to comprehend how much that means for him."

"And how do you feel about him?"

"Well, saying I'm in love with him makes me feel very much like I'm an idiot nineteen-year-old boy who knows nothing about anything." Zagreus sighed, tipping his head back against the headrest and closing his eyes. "He's an immortal god, and I'm me. We don't seem to have much in common. And I'd imagine a normal dating relationship would be strange, what with him living in the Underworld and me... here. Or on Olympus."

"Not much in common other than being immortal gods, you mean."

"I know it's difficult to imagine, but I'm sort of having a rough time of coming to terms with that part of myself, mother."

"You'll find your way, Zagreus, I know you. You've done it before."

Encouraging though that may have been, he just groaned, rubbing at the back of his head where a tension headache was starting to build. "Oddly enough the 'immortal god' thing is more difficult than the bisexual thing." Infinitely more so. Even if his mother didn't need any explanation this time. "I... hmm. I've spent all this time trying to prevent my father from taking me to the Underworld, and strangely... if Thanatos is there, that's the only place I want to be. It's ridiculous, right?"

"People have done stranger things, for love."

"I can't leave you, though—and if what Than says is correct, he's coming for you, as well. I couldn't risk your safety for something like that."

"You know, I felt the same way about you, once. That I couldn't risk your well-being, your life, even for someone I cared for dearly."

And Persephone had, on that occasion, chosen to live life on the surface, to raise her son in secrecy, separated from her husband and others she clearly cared about. A heavy weight sank into Zagreus' chest, but he knew that if his mother had made such a decision, he could follow. "I understand. I'll... I'll keep going, to the ocean. To Olympus."

"Oh, gods, no! Zagreus. I've lived my life so that you will never have to choose that, and I well know I have some leverage with your father now."

"Mother, *please* don't do anything dangerous—"

"I'm not, love. I promise."

The call went dead, then, and Zagreus stared at his phone in utter astonishment.

Whatever the hell his mother was doing, it sounded like something Zagreus had to stop.

— — —

They took off in the middle of the night, no time to enjoy any sort of afterglow, which Zagreus was deeply upset about. He was more upset about the idea of his mother trying to bargain with his father, who'd been trying to *kill Zagreus* for the better part of a week, and therefore did not seem easy to bargain with.

They drove in near-silence, a light rain pattering down on the windshield and the wipers mechanically counting time. Thanatos had no words of encouragement, and he held himself in a way that Zagreus could easily identify as fear.

He took Than's left hand, pulled it into his lap, and squeezed, running his thumb over Thanatos' knuckles. They stayed that way until they reached the shore.

— — —

It was early morning by the time they pulled to a stop at a small stretch of beach, the rain having mostly ended and the sky full with a blush-pink sunrise. Zagreus hesitated with the truck still running, his foot on the brake. He'd have to let go of Than's hand to shift it into park.

"Are you ready?" Thanatos asked him.

"Not a bit," he said, but he parked the truck and got out, his hand feeling new and strange, having gotten used to the feeling of Than's fingers between his own.

There was an enormous figure on the beach, which at first looked like a massive sand dune with strange red grasses poking out the top, until it shifted, dislodging all the sand it had been rolling in. Any early morning sunlight that would have warmed Zagreus was blocked out in shadow as a creature so large his brain could not quite comprehend it rose before him, six eyes focused intensely on him.

Cerberus was much fluffier than Zagreus had expected, honestly.

"Are we... going to fight?" Zagreus asked, because Thanatos already had his sword unsheathed. He'd gotten back into his full godly regalia while Zag's back had been turned, now appearing as a deity ready for battle rather than somebody wearing his boyfriend's hoodie.

"Cerberus is the final barrier for anyone attempting to escape the Underworld. I suppose he's also your final challenge."

"But he's so..."

"Enormous and terrifying? Yes, that's the point."

"No, he's so cute!"

Cerberus cocked one of his heads in a manner that reminded Zagreus so exactly of his dog back home that he wanted to run across the beach and pet the hound of hell. Cerberus' middle head barked, which was ground-

shakingly loud, but the far right head was panting and sticking out his tongue, which, aside from the tongue being neon-green, seemed friendly.

"*Zagreus.*" Thanatos sounded deeply exasperated.

"I couldn't fight him! He looks like such a good boy!"

At the tone of Zag's voice, Cerberus dipped into a happy little play-bow with another excited *woof*.

"Zag, please remain at a safe distance—"

Zagreus, who did not remain at a safe distance, was laughing brightly as Cerberus snuffled at him and tickled him. "I think he likes me!"

Thanatos just gaped at him, watching Cerberus lick Zag's hair until it stuck up even more than usual. "I... this is unexpected," he said.

Cerberus, as it turned out, really liked when Zag gave him scratches under his leftmost chin, and also greatly seemed to enjoy Zagreus crooning at him about how adorable and fuzzy he was. Thanatos remained gobsmacked, but snapped back to attention when a sound similar to Thanatos' teleporting rang out, and the sky above them went black all of a sudden.

"Mother—oh. Um."

"No, Nyx only transported me here," said Persephone, who'd appeared on the beach wearing something Zagreus had never seen her in, a gauzy white dress and a sage-green shawl, with her hair tied up in green ribbon and her usual lilac blossoms behind her ear. It suited her, he thought, but it did also serve to make her look like the goddess he was steadily realizing she was. The sunrise went back to its usual coloration as Nyx's magic dissipated, and Zagreus scrambled across the sand to hug her, his mother returning the embrace with such force, she lifted him off his feet for a moment.

It made him feel like a child to admit, even to himself, that it felt *good* to be back with his mother, to hear her familiar laugh from somewhere other than his phone speaker. He'd always known he would eventually see her again,

but it was as if a part of him feared eternal separation regardless of what he knew.

"Mother, you shouldn't be here," Zagreus insisted. "That was the whole point, he might find you—"

"It doesn't matter," Persephone said, settling a hand on his arm. "I've never been afraid of Hades. And I would rather he make trouble for me than for you."

Thanatos continued to look pained, his grip tightening on his scythe in a way that would make it difficult to swing if they really were attacked. Cerberus had lain down in the sand and was obediently allowing Persephone to stroke his ears. "Would someone," Thanatos said, "*please* tell me what the hell is going on?"

"We're waiting for Hades to show his face," Persephone said, and then laughed, because she'd found a spot that made Cerberus thump his foot, which sent a spray of sand flying.

Thanatos made an aggravated noise that reminded Zag of some of his very early responses to mortal food. "And *why* are we waiting for Lord Hades instead of summoning Poseidon like we're meant to?"

"Because," Zagreus said, taking his hand, "I'm not going to Olympus without you. I think I'm gonna check out my dad's place. Mum's here to make sure he doesn't try to keep me down there for all eternity."

Thanatos snatched his hand away, taking a staggering step back, and Zag knew he wasn't just unsteady walking on the sand. "No," he said. "Zag, this isn't just a 'check out your father's place' kind of thing. You can't—your life will never be the same if you do this. I can't abide by you doing this just for me."

Persephone tucked herself carefully behind one of Cerberus' heads, although it was only the barest illusion of privacy. Zagreus chased after Than.

"My life's never going to be the same anyway," he said. "And I'm not just doing this for you—not to make it sound like you're flattering yourself, I am at least in part doing this for you. But also, if I don't do this, I'm never going to understand half of what I am. And I think that's worth it. And I think you're worth it."

Zagreus used to think Thanatos only possessed two emotions: disinterest and disgust. Watching him now, hand in his face, voice clearly near-tears, it was impossible that he'd ever believed that. "You've known me for *days*, Zagreus."

"And I'd be kicking myself for the rest of my life—which I am given to believe will be very long—if I don't... stay by your side. See where this goes."

"It's going to be different," Thanatos said, everything about him a warning. "And who knows what the Olympians will think if they find out that you chose Hades over them."

"No idea," Zagreus said. "Let's find out."

"You can't just—"

Thanatos was interrupted by Persephone, clearing her throat just loud enough to get his attention. She was seated atop one of Cerberus' enormous paws now, leaning against the hellhound's muzzle, which was obediently lowered. "While I appreciate your obvious care for him," she said, "you'll find you cannot convince my son otherwise. There is one thing I know he inherited from me. He is the most stubborn person you will ever meet."

"Mother!"

"You are!" She was laughing again.

"Listen, Than." Zagreus turned his attention again. "If you don't... if you don't feel the same way about me, it's fine, whatever you may have said before. I'll be fine. But don't ask me to leave if you really do want me to. Ugh. God. This is ridiculously dramatic." He shook his head, then faced

Than, standing as resolutely as he could. "I love you. I'm coming with you. I'd maybe like to meet my father. That's all."

"Well. I think you're certainly going to get to meet your father," Thanatos said, because there was another being appearing before them and *seriously*, *did all of the gods know how to teleport?* When was Zag going to get his teleporting abilities, that's what he would like to know.

He discovered, near-immediately, that he did not resemble his father.

While Persephone, Thanatos, and even Nyx could reasonably be mistaken for a human, there was no denying that Hades was a god. He stood nearly twice Zag's height, dark and imposing, wearing a laurel wreath that burned the same way Zag's did, his feet aflame as well. He was dressed in red and black, skulls adorning every part of his ensemble like macabre jewelry.

And he fell to one knee as soon as he noticed Persephone.

"My queen." While he addressed her in the same terms Thanatos used, Hades was not merely giving Persephone a sign of deference and respect. It was a title full of longing, spoken hesitantly, as though he was uncertain whether she would accept it.

"Hades." Persephone did not move from her place, and Cerberus did not seem inclined to return to his master's side. "We need to talk about our son."

Zagreus, who had been instructed to head down the beach with Thanatos, kicked at the sand, turning the toes of his sneakers gritty. "What do you think they're talking about?" he asked, casting a glance over his shoulder. This early, the beach was mostly deserted, but he also worried for the point in the day at which all the mere mortals would come out, and would find Underworld royalty taking up their usual sunbathing spots.

"You, from the sounds of things." Thanatos was walking, despite having reverted to his full godly appearance. He'd vanished his scythe, and the

spiky gauntlet he'd been wearing, which made it much easier for Zagreus to take his hand.

"Do you really not want me to go with you?" Zagreus asked.

"I want you to do what will make you happy," Thanatos said. "The Underworld is very different from the place you come from, and I don't want you to regret going there."

"You make me happy," Zagreus said, coming to a stop and pulling Thanatos with him. The sun was half-risen across the water, turning the sky all kinds of gold and pink and orange, and yet, Zagreus had better things to look at. Thanatos blushed the same gold as the rising sun.

It was almost impossible to hear Thanatos over the waves. "You make me happy, too."

There was nothing to do, then, but to pull Thanatos in and kiss him. Zagreus held him close, every action in his body begging Thanatos not to let him go, although such pleas were unnecessary. Thanatos held Zagreus as if he would not let go unless he was forced to.

His hands still gripped Zag's waist as he broke the kiss but did not lean away, his forehead pressed against Zag's.

"This is going to be quite an adventure, you know," Zagreus said, drinking in Than's soft laugh. "You'll have to tell me how things go down there, what you do all day if you don't eat or sleep. We'll go on another road trip, just underground this time."

"Coming from anybody else, that'd sound like torture," Thanatos said. "But I think I like going on adventures with you."

